Decolonising Foreign Funding Policies from Localised Contexts in Kenya, India and Bangladesh
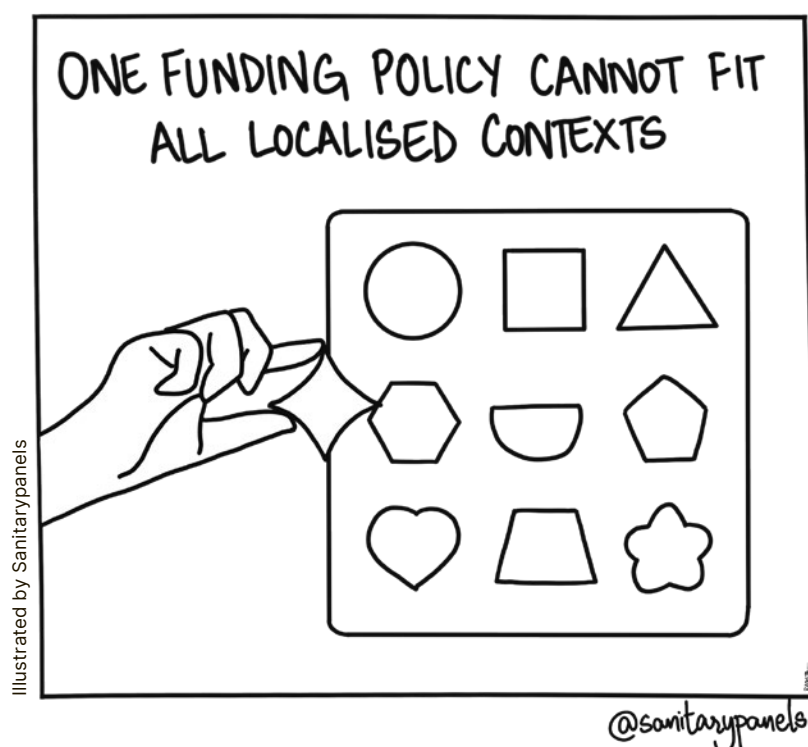
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Illustrated by Sanitarypanels

Advocacy Summary

■ Background

Colonial legacies persist in foreign development funding policies, influencing feminist movements and perpetuating structural inequities in the Majority World. Our research investigates how coloniality manifests in official development assistance (ODA) from Minority World countries with feminist foreign policy frameworks. By analysing qualitative interviews and policies, we propose a decolonial funding framework.

■ Key Issues

1. **Colonial Dynamics in Funding**

   Donor-imposed priorities undermine local contexts, exacerbating socioeconomic disparities. Structural and material colonialities are embedded in ODA strategies, limiting recipient autonomy.

2. **Impact on Feminist Movements:**

Funding focuses on Western frameworks, neglecting Southern feminist voices.

Compliance requirements disproportionately burden local NGOs, marginalising grassroots movements.

3. **Geopolitical Contradictions:**

Countries advocate feminist policies while supporting geopolitical agendas, such as arms exports to conflict zones, undermining gender justice efforts.

■ Key Findings

1. ODA often prioritises donor interests over local needs, perpetuating inequality.
2. Strict compliance measures and centralised oversight hinder equitable access to funds.
3. Intersectional issues, such as caste and gender, are frequently overlooked in program designs.

■ Key Recommendations

➔ **For Governments**
- Adopt reparations-based funding models prioritising marginalised voices.
- Simplify compliance mechanisms to support grassroots organisations.
- Ensure funding decisions align with community-defined priorities.

➔ **For Multilateral Institutions**
- Promote equity by incorporating intersectional frameworks into funding criteria.
- Encourage localised decision-making in project planning and implementation.

➔ **For Private Philanthropy**
- Provide flexible, long-term funding for feminist movements.
- Prioritise culturally sensitive, community-driven initiatives.

➔ **For Civil Society**
- Advocate for reduced structural barriers to funding. Build coalitions to amplify local voices in global funding dialogues.

■ Call to Action

Stakeholders must urgently dismantle colonial funding structures by adopting reparative justice models, simplifying bureaucratic barriers, and ensuring that funding priorities are defined and led by intersectional marginalised communities. A decolonised funding framework must prioritise long-term, flexible, and locally governed investments that empower feminist movements, address systemic inequalities, and transform global power dynamics to enable sustainable and equitable development in the Majority World.

Authors and Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Colonial and unequal power dynamics dominate Kenya, India, and Bangladesh's funding mechanisms. The neo-colonial frameworks that underpin the global landscape of foreign aid and development funding have emerged over many years. Activists and practitioners working on women's economic rights, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender-based violence frequently encounter complexities associated with official development assistance (ODA) provided by government agencies in Europe and North America. These engagements often reflect donor-imposed priorities that either fail to align with or actively undermine local contexts' geopolitical, social, and cultural nuances. In the last decade, 'feminist foreign Policy' has been put forward by several states in Europe and North America. Their vision has been, broadly, to overcome the gendered exclusions that have contributed to crises and insecurities, uplift women leaders through more explicit policies and funding, and counter the backlash against gender justice emerging worldwide. While all feminist foreign policies have not continued with changing governments, substantial ODA funding has nevertheless originated from countries that initiated them (e.g. Canada, France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain), or responded to them with more advanced gender equality-focused funding (e.g., the United Kingdom, the United States).

This research reviews and analyses the feminist foreign policy frameworks of Germany, Canada, and Sweden, as well as the gender-informed funding frameworks of the United Kingdom, the United States, and the Netherlands. This analysis highlights the underlying colonialities, both material and structural, inherent in bilateral funding mechanisms. This is complemented by in-depth qualitative interviews with feminists, women's rights activists, and NGO workers in ODA-funded institutions in the three countries. This research examines the diverse impacts of development funding on southern Majority World feminist movements. Subsequently, a decolonial funding framework is proposed based on these findings.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology informed and guided by three complementary analytical lenses: i) Black Feminist 'standpoint theory' (Hill Collin, 2000), ii) Dalit feminism (Paik, 2020) and iii) intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1994). All call attention to the impacts of dominant power structures on the lives of women and girls:

- Black Feminist Standpoint theory focuses on the experiences and perspectives of marginalised women. It calls on the research to focus on Black women's lived experiences, voices, and distinctive points of view as critical knowledge sources.
- Dalit feminist analysis addresses the unique intersection of caste and gender oppression faced by Dalit women, who are often marginalised within both patriarchal structures and the caste system.
- Intersectionality calls attention to the barriers and exclusions experienced by women living at the intersections of oppression along the lines of race, gender and class.

Ultimately, these three approaches consider the impacts of overlapping power structures and call attention to impacted women's experiences, perspectives, and demands. By utilising this 'experiential learning' methodology, the researchers explore how feminists in these countries navigate, challenge, and transform funding policies. The project generates new insights into development funding and its relationship to historical and present-day (neo)coloniality.

Research Methods

This research commenced with an examination of publicly accessible Official Development Assistance (ODA) strategies from the United Kingdom (UK), the United States (US), Germany, Canada, Sweden, and the Netherlands. As high-lighted in existing empirical work, we chose these countries, and desk research revealed the significant ODA funding from these countries to Kenya, India and Bangladesh. They employed a decolonial analysis, informed by the theoretical frameworks, that revealed various material and structural colonialities in these strategies. This was followed by 17 interviews with NGO workers, feminist activists, and community organisers in India, Kenya and Bangladesh. Snowball sampling was used to find research participants. Data from the literature review and interviews allowed for exploration of the different ways coloniality shows up in the sending and receiving of bilateral funding in three countries. This process facilitated the development of the in-depth interview questionnaire .

Limitations of the research

One of the most significant limitations was time. Owing to unforeseen administrative constraints, the project started a month later than scheduled; so, the timeline for conducting the research was only three months. An extended research period would elicit engagement with more participants and deeper/broader exploration of perspectives in the interviews and literature. Another challenge was the availability of interviewees during the time frame. Many potential participants were occupied with major conferences and events, and while many expressed a willingness to participate, time constraints made meetings impossible. A significant limitation also emerged towards the end of the project. When President Donald Trump announced executive orders to freeze USAID worldwide, participants who formerly agreed to be part of this study withdrew their consent and requested that the researchers remove any of the shared information. This may have narrowed the scope of the findings. Finally, since this research employed qualitative methods and a relatively small sample size for interviews, its generalisability is limited. Regardless, the unique value it provides is in-depth insights into the experiences of ODA funding in the specific contexts of the three countries. The participants' and researchers' subjective experiences and interpretations shape the findings.

Literature Review

Post-colonial nation-building in context

The notion of building a sovereign nation after hundreds of years of colonial extraction, displacement and decimation of indigenous cultures, livelihoods, and norms is a mammoth challenge. Colonisers deliberately redrew continental political geographies, reshaped socioeconomic structures and divided and merged ethnic groups, with devastating long-term consequences. After achieving independence, nation-building in Kenya, India, and Bangladesh faced complex negotiating processes with economic, political, and social conditions, not just at a national level but also on the broader evolution of the global capitalist and geopolitical context.

After **Kenya** achieved independence from the British in 1963, it faced entrenched barriers to development and industrialisation (Fahnbulleh, 2006). Colonial extractivism built its economy around natural resource extraction for export to the British (Odege, 2009; Easton and Gwaindepi, 2021). This was implemented structurally, making it hard to undo. For example, land policies were set in place that discriminated against native agricultural practices, forced the mobilisation

of Kenyan labour to service European agriculture, and displaced and dispossessed indigenous people from their lands to make way for European settlers (Fahnbulleh, 2006). Extractivism was (and continues to be) highly gendered, leading to particular social, political and economic barriers and exclusions for women and girls (Pereira and Tsikata, 2021; Presley, 1992). These structures laid the foundations of a development trajectory rooted in colonial legacies and norms. In the immediate post-independence era, Kenya had remarkable macroeconomic growth. However, after a decade, the growth faltered. The state pursued excessively expansionary policies in 1970-71, leading to a balance of payment crisis (Bevan, Collier and Gunning, 1990). When this was resolved, the 1973 global oil crisis triggered a price rise and, alongside a severe drought, Kenya's economy faced a serious trade deficit.

India became independent of British rule in 1947 and faced similar structural barriers. British rule had cemented a deeply extractive economy, draining nearly $45 trillion between 1765 and 1938 (Patnaik, 2017). Efforts to build a nation focused on economic development, social justice, 'unity in diversity', and democratic governance, themes underpinned by the 1950 Constitution. The National Congress's mobilisation against British rule was strengthened by its advocacy for a cohesive national identity, marked by efforts to unify India's diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic groups around a collective vision. Yet, Independent India grappled with significant economic challenges, leading to the development of Five-Year Plans aimed at industrialisation and agricultural growth to shift the economy away from colonial structures (Jha, 2005). The independence period was characterised by high regulation of industries and control over integration with the broader world. Between the 1950s and 1980s, India experienced a modest GDP growth rate of around 3.6%, but at the same time, the trade deficit grew, from approximately $0.1 billion in 1948 to $6.3 billion in 1980 (Government of India, 2021). This led to questions about the sustainability of the economic model in the globalising context.

Bangladesh gained independence from Pakistan in 1971. Given the legacy of British colonialism until 1947 and the oppressive rule by Pakistan, Bangladesh's post-colonial nation-building has been complex and multifaceted, focusing on solidifying its national cultural identity through language and religion (Hajjaj, 2022). The nation established a parliamentary democracy that struggled with instability, experiencing several coups and periods of military rule. Nevertheless, the new nation managed steady economic growth in the 1970s-1990s at a rate of 2%, rising to 4.5%. This was followed by rapid growth since the 1990s, due to a focus on the textile and garments industry and the power of remittances from its talent working abroad (Helal and Hossain, 2013). Bangladesh is often called

a success story of post-colonial development, notably by cutting poverty in half (World Bank, 2024). But the nation has continued to face severe challenges affecting its development trajectory, including severe climate change impacts, as well as global economic instability brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic and conflicts, and political instability and lack of trust in government, leading to the ousting of the former Prime Minister, Sheikha Hassina, in 2024. Many of these challenges are rooted in the coloniality embedded by the British in Bengal over two hundred years; in particular, the establishment of elites aligned with British and broader western values and agendas, as well as their own economic and political interests (Kabir and Chowdry, 2017).

Foreign Policy, Development Funding and Neocolonial Power

Subsequently, all three countries have accessed significant financial transfers from the Minority World through foreign aid and Development Assistance budgets. Each country developed its foreign policy positions, which enabled the transaction of aid to serve national priorities. Much of these efforts to transfer aid to meet these aims have been critiqued over time as tools to maintain (neo) colonial power over post-colonial nations.

Post-independence **Kenya** pursued a general foreign policy framework focused on contributing to international and multilateral- ism, addressing inequalities and championing a 'rising Africa' (Howell, 1968). Kenya developed close relationships with the United States and Britain to provide a pro-West ally, vis-à-vis Russia, on the African continent. Given shifting political and territorial dynamics around it, its vision of economic development and national security underpinned the development of close relations with the US and UK (Mabera, 2016). In the 1980s trade deficit context, the nation was encouraged by the international financial institutions to address its structural economic deficits through a 'structural adjustment programme' (SAP). SAPs were implemented across the Majority World over the 1980s-2000s. Unfortunately, they resulted in very little inclusive economic growth and development, especially in Africa. They have been heavily critiqued for being neo-colonial tools, encouraging an over-dependence on resource extraction and cash-crop agriculture rather than industrial develop-ment and diversification (Geo-JaJa and Mangum, 2001). In this era, the 'United States Agency for International Development' (USAID), founded under the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, initiated development funding to Kenya to 'strengthen institutions, preserve natural resources, support better healthcare, education and economic opportunities. This funding faced significant fluctuations in the 1980s

and 1990s but grew in recent decades due to a renewed donor confidence in the government's resolve for economic management and building governance measures to mitigate corruption (Mweiga, 2009). Its strategic development plan, Vision 2030, is critical to Kenya's development relationships today. It envisions transforming Kenya into 'a newly industrialising, middle-income country providing a high quality of life to all its citizens in a clean and secure environment'.

India's post-colonial identity was mainly characterised by its foreign policy. During the Cold War, the nation adopted a non-aligned position to assert its sovereignty and maintain independence from the American and Soviet blocs (Srivastava, 2010; Abraham, 2008). Indian foreign policy was characterised by three features: its role in United Nations peacekeeping operations, as a critical proponent of the non-aligned movement, and as a protagonist for decolonisation (Srivastava, 2010). This analysis has not been without critique, *"far from standing apart from the world, India's international relations thinking was the story of multiple intellectual lineages—both 'imperial' and 'anti-imperial'—and their entanglements in global processes of knowledge systematisation"* (Raghavan et al, 2022). India's first foreign aid deal was a loan from the United States in 1947 as part of its 'Post-War Reconstruction Program', which aimed to help countries rebuild after World War II (Kamath, 1992). Subsequently, India has received substantial development aid from numerous countries and international institutions, sometimes being the most significant national recipient. For example, in 2020 received 80 billion US dollars in aid. India's relationship with aid is complex, as it has also become a provider of official development assistance in recent years (Agarwal, 2007).

Bangladesh also developed a foreign policy based on non-alignment, aiming to maintain regional economic integration through diplomatic relations with India and China (Khan, 2023). Bangladesh's foreign policy has emphasised sovereignty and equality, 'friendship to all', including non-interference in other countries' internal affairs, peaceful settlements of international disputes and respect for international law (Hasan, 1983; Ahsan, 1999; Shahjahan, 2023). Economic diplomacy is at the core – to secure investments, aid and technical assistance (Siddiqui et al, 2022). The first foreign aid received by Bangladesh was from USAID in its post-war independence in the form of food, medical and logistical supplies (Rafi and Khan, 2021; Hossain, Amin and Alam, 2012). As aforementioned, Bangladesh is framed as a development success, moving from the world's second poorest nation to a lower-middle-income country with an average 4.5% GDP growth in the last decade (IMF, 2024). A focus on good trade relationships, export-oriented indus-trialisation, education and social protection has been key (Raihan & Bourguignon, 2020). Bangladesh is also one of the countries that receives the most foreign aid year on year. However, a devastating famine occurred in 1974, leading to the

deaths of over 1.5 million Bangladeshi people - and this was caused primarily by the intersections of government mismanagement, consecutive climate-related disasters and a failure of international aid donors to understand and respond appropriately to the social political dynamics of the post-colonial context (Hossain, 2017). Naomi Hossein points out that foreign aid to Bangladesh surged in efforts to ensure no such famine would recur. However, an emphasis on 'growth' rather than inclusive growth allowed elites to align their agendas, attract aid and fail to focus on addressing weak governance. As a result, Bangladesh became a kind of 'lab' to experiment with western-led development ideas - often at the expense of local people, especially women.

Coloniality, as a conceptual framework, represents the lasting influence of colonial socio-political and economic systems on Minority World-Majority World relationships (Winter, 2016). Scholars from Africa and Asia have illustrated the legacy of colonialism's economic, social and political impacts on the foreign aid agenda. ODA has been characterised by coloniality through the use of "political conditionalities, Westerners imposed incompatible and decontextualised values" forcing nations into endless crises (Fentahun, 2023: 2; Kozul-Wright, 2024; Barrowclough et al, 2021). Donor countries commonly impose their normative frameworks and values on recipient nations under the pretext of aid and development assistance (Winter, 2016). This sustains colonial power structures, diminishes local autonomy and engagement, and exacerbates disparities (Barder, 2011). This colonial, capitalist economic exploitation has played a significant part in exacerbating inequalities in the Majority World. These colonial economic legacies continue to influence the socio-economic conditions as well as the frameworks for the conception and execution of ODA in Kenya, India and Bangladesh, making it a driver of colonialism and imperialism in its ways (Greco, 2020; Gupta, 1998; North and Grinspun, 2016). Development investment is, therefore, a form of soft power – whether intentional or not (Winter, 2016; Blair et al, 2022). This power reinforces the hierarchical dynamics between donors and recipients (Tiessen, 2024; Becker, 2020).

Development aid and feminism in post-colonial contexts

Most feminists argue that conventional development finance channels reinforce colonial power dynamics by often excluding the opinions and experiences of marginalised groups, especially women and gender minorities (Hicks, 2021). For example, international development organisations may fail to account for women's complex barriers to accessing resources and services. Existing research proves that the current funding dynamics frequently favour Western feminist ideals, neglecting Indigenous feminist voices (Okech, 2009). They may also co-opt feminist

perspectives and movements for more conservative activities or aims, or rehash generalised statistics or tropes about 'women' and their 'value' to development rather than fund southern women's rights initiatives and their articulation of their goals and needs (Ibid). These trends prompt essential enquiries regarding the purpose and impacts of development programs on development and the people and nations on the receiving end (Altaf, 2011). It prompts us to examine whose voices are elevated and muted in aid discourses. Researchers and practitioners in Kenya, India and Bangladesh have argued that there are common gaps in understanding amongst bilateral funders of local contexts as well as racialised and colonial assumptions and tropes which impact their funding decisions and modes of engagement (Umuhumuza, 2019). This research addresses some of these gaps and attitudes by offering new insights for feminist foreign policy and funding from local contexts.

Important to emphasise in the feminist analysis is how patriarchal norms inform ODA decision making, as well as broader decision making that affects women's, girls' and gender non-conforming people's lives. The global context of polycrisis, with overlapping climate injustice, macroeconomic injustice and imperial wars, overlaps to compound the barriers to women's and girls' rights. In these contexts, there are particular impacts on gender justice due to patriarchal notions of fiscal management; when budgetary space is squeezed, services that are critical for gender equality are often some of the first to lose funding (FEMNET, 2022; Muchhala and Guillem, 2022; Hawkins and Zucker-Marquez, 2024). For 26 countries, debt repayments in 2022 cost more than they received in total bilateral foreign aid (IIED, 2024). The creditors have historically been multilateral development banks and private lenders operating from colonial positionalities in the United States and Europe. However, the landscape is now evolving as China plays an increasing role.

Nevertheless, there is an inherent coloniality and paradox in the failure of ODA to explicitly address the structural macroeconomic justice while emphasising its efforts to drive gender equality (Feminist Action Nexus for Economic and Climate Justice, 2024; FEMNET, 2024). Debt is a direct manifestation of neocolonial patriarchal violence, as is climate injustice, which was driven by colonial forces and has severely gendered impacts. Climate-focused ODA and broader climate finance solutions funding have privileged male and elite voices and institutions (UN Women, 2024). Colonial patriarchal violence is systemic and perpetrated through ODA in different forms. In recent years, there has been an explicit pulling back of ODA funding to feminist movements and collectives who are challenging the system norms and structures, demonstrating the resistance to feminist decolonial work in the Majority World.

Fundamentally, the feminist movement calls for a critical transformation of how money and financial support are conceptualised and allocated. This reform must focus on equality, acknowledge historical injustices, and commit to elevating marginalised voices through inclusive and collaborative development processes. The following section explores some of these themes , providing insights and evidence from this research.
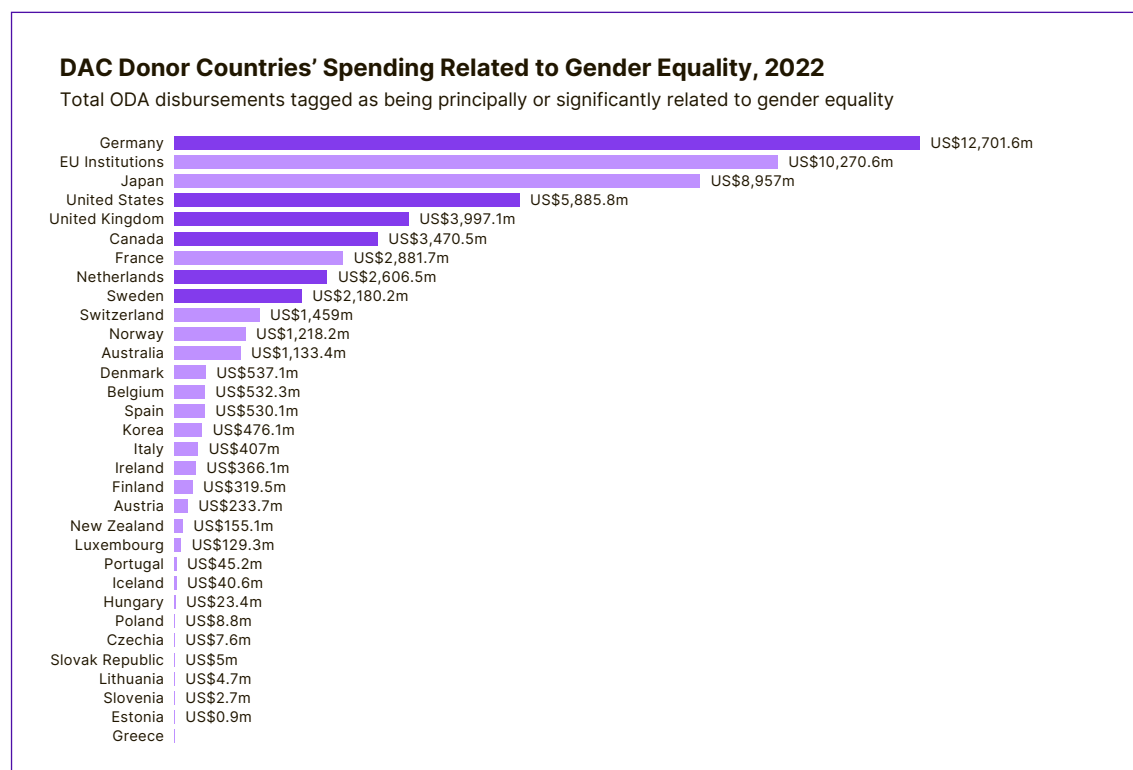
Findings

This section reviews ODA funding for gender equality in six countries: Germany, Sweden, Canada, the Netherlands, the UK, and the US.

Ambivalence of feminist foreign policies

The ODA tracker, illustrated in Figure 1, outlines the levels of bilateral funding for gender equality in 2022 from OECD countries to its 'development assistance committee' listed nations.[1]

Figure 1: DAC Donor Countries' spending related to Gender Equality, 2022

DAC Donor Countries' Spending Related to Gender Equality, 2022
Total ODA disbursements tagged as being principally or significantly related to gender equality

Country	Amount
Germany	US$12,701.6m
EU Institutions	US$10,270.6m
Japan	US$8,957m
United States	US$5,885.8m
United Kingdom	US$3,997.1m
Canada	US$3,470.5m
France	US$2,881.7m
Netherlands	US$2,606.5m
Sweden	US$2,180.2m
Switzerland	US$1,459m
Norway	US$1,218.2m
Australia	US$1,133.4m
Denmark	US$537.1m
Belgium	US$532.3m
Spain	US$530.1m
Korea	US$476.1m
Italy	US$407m
Ireland	US$366.1m
Finland	US$319.5m
Austria	US$233.7m
New Zealand	US$155.1m
Luxembourg	US$129.3m
Portugal	US$45.2m
Iceland	US$40.6m
Hungary	US$23.4m
Poland	US$8.8m
Czechia	US$7.6m
Slovak Republic	US$5m
Lithuania	US$4.7m
Slovenia	US$2.7m
Estonia	US$0.9m
Greece	

Source: OECD CRS, Based on the DAC Gender Equality Policy Marker. Disbursements, in 2021 prices.

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1. For more info see: https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/oda-eligibility-and-conditions/dac-list-of-oda-recipients.html#oda-eligible-international-organisations-list

German Feminist Foreign Policy

Summary

Germany adopted a feminist foreign policy (FPP) in its 2021 coalition agreement, following countries like Sweden (which later discontinued one), Canada, France, Mexico, and others. Its FFP seeks to address power structures traditionally embedded in foreign policy, which have been male-dominated, elitist, and shaped by colonial influences (Federal Foreign Office, n/a).

Implementation

The Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development released a feminist strategy in 2023, which states that a human rights-based approach is foundational to its development policy. The BMZ then announced a target funding quota for projects contributing to gender equality. The German FFP prioritises three areas: protecting women's rights, promoting gender equality and increasing women's participation and representation in global politics (Ibid). Like Sweden, the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs offers guidelines for implementation. The FPP guidelines focus on three areas of action: gender mainstreaming, gender budgeting, and internal diversity.

Challenges

- **Navigating Political Resistance**: The FFP has encountered resistance and debate in German politics, with critics, particularly conservative factions, arguing that the 'feminist' label is divisive or overly idealistic (Saskia, 2023; Domres, 2024). Analysts have also questioned whether the FFP may weaken Germany's ability to respond to security threats. The FFP's supporters emphasise its role in addressing systemic inequalities and promoting inclusive participation in peace and security processes (Ibid).

- **Geopolitical Positions**: The most significant challenge of Germany's FFP is in realising its values in the context of the country's increasing focus on security and defence, brought to light by its contrasting positions on the ongoing Russian war on Ukraine and the Israeli genocide of the Palestinian people. For example, the German government has increased military spending, partly in response to Russian aggression in Ukraine (Mello, 2024). In the FFP guidelines, the Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, Annalena Baerbock (2023) argues that the policy calls for a proactive stance on Ukraine, based on human rights values (Saskia, 2023). However, the guidelines offer no advice on balancing feminist goals with Germany's strategic interests. Indeed, Germany's international support, financial or military, aligns with broader Euro-Atlantic

strategic security interests. This perpetuates a colonial relationship where German security concerns—and those of its allies—take precedence over the specific needs of countries, reinforcing a structure in which Western allies retain the power to shape global security norms (Domres, 2024).

Germany's unwavering support to Israel with substantial military, financial and political backing has contributed to the systemic oppression, displacement, violence and genocide of the Palestinian people. Indeed, Palestine has become a 'test for FPPs', illuminating which women matter to these governments, and which women's lives are expendable (Saleh, 2024). This duality of response to the Russia-Ukraine war and Israel's genocide in Palestine contrasts with the FPP's disarmament goals. Feminist scholars from the Majority World point out that, "*the rhetoric of doing feminist good has become embedded in imperial and repressive state projects whose goals are antithetical to the basic principles of justice and dignity that feminism advances, often appearing as an active instrument in their logics*" (Abu-Lughod et al, 2023).

- **Eurocentricity:** Feminist advocates and experts have called on the government to integrate a plurality of feminist perspectives worldwide in its FPP to mitigate against a solely Eurocentric understanding and approach (Hauschild and Leonie, 2024).

Swedish Feminist Foreign Policy

Summary

Sweden released the first FFP in 2014, under the leadership of then Foreign Minister Margot Wallström (OECD, 2021). It aimed to mainstream gender equality in diplomacy, aid, and trade. The United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1325 on 'Women, Peace and Security' informed the FFP.

Implementation

The Foreign Service Action Plan 2015–2018 outlined five priority action areas: promoting the rule of law, fighting gender-based and sexual violence, supporting sexual and reproductive health rights, advancing women's economic empowerment and finally championing sustainable development (Aggestam and Annika, 2016). When the government changed in 2022, the incoming foreign minister, Tobias Billström, declared the policy would be retracted (Walfridsson, 2022). There are questions about the extent to which the normative shifts brought about by the

policy can be reversed, nevertheless, the FPP is no longer in existence (Towns and Elin, 2024).

Challenges

A closer look at Sweden's 'pioneering' FFP reveals its embedded contradictions and colonialities, including:

- **Arms exports, economic priorities and feminist principles:** Sweden's self-image as a 'humanitarian superpower' driving gender equality is undermined by its arms exports. The nation still ranks among the world's top ten arms exporters, selling to authoritarian regimes like the United Arab Emirates, which is involved in the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (Nasser, 2018). These exports fuel conflicts where women and girls suffer disproportionately, creating a striking contradiction between Sweden's FFP goals and its economic actions.

- **Dissonance between domestic and global gender commitments:** Since 2019, funding for gender-focused initiatives has decreased annually, signalling a shift away from prioritising women's empowerment in Swedish ODA (Irsten, 2019). The new government has announced plans to freeze aid spending, lowering its traditional contribution from 1 per cent of Gross National Income to a projected 0.8 per cent in 2023. In September 2024, Minister for International Development Cooperation Benjamin Dousa revealed that the annual ODA allocation will drop from SEK56 billion (US$5.5 billion) to SEK53 billion (US$5.2 billion) between 2026-2028, but did not specify which programmes would receive cuts. This reflects the country's changing political dynamics as conservative politics grow across Europe (Ibid).

- **Homogenising imperial feminisms through FFP:** The FFP's framework has been criticised for presenting a monolithic view of women's issues, failing to incorporate diverse local-level and intersectional perspectives. The policy fails to articulate how to account for the geographically and culturally specific challenges faced by different groups of women, creating risks to its effective implementation (Ibid). Some critics argue that Sweden's FFP inadvertently promoted a Western-centric feminist agenda, imposing values that may not align with the unique sociopolitical contexts of non-Western nations (Ibid).

- **Immigration and refugee asylum policies**: During the 2015 refugee crisis, Sweden received about 160,000 asylum seekers but enacted restrictive border policies that disproportionately affected women. Many lacked the documentation required to enter the country, which posed significant

barriers, especially for family reunification, leaving women and children in precarious situations in camps abroad (Skodo, 2018). Nearly 30% of Sweden's development budget, earmarked for development aid, was redirected to manage the refugee influx. This funding shift, caused by contradictory and restrictive policies, jeopardised gender-focused programs in the Majority World, reducing support for initiatives specifically targeting women and children (Nasser, 2018).

Canadian Feminist Foreign Policy

Summary

Canada has become a prominent advocate for advancing gender equality globally. Canada launched the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in 2017, focusing on gender equality, climate change, and inclusive economic growth. It included specific commitments on gender equality spending; that by 2021-22, i) At least 95% of Canada's bilateral ODA will target or integrate gender equality; and 15% of bilateral ODA will go to initiatives dedicated to advancing gender equality (Govt of Canada, n/a).

Implementation

The FIAP has directed over CAD 1.4 billion annually toward gender-equality projects, impacting sectors ranging from sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) to women's economic empowerment. However, the FIAP has failed to deliver on certain commitments, such as the 15% ODA to gender equality-focused initiatives (Equality Fund, 2023).

Challenges

While Canada's ODA funding strategy emphasises partnership, local ownership, and a flexible approach, its design and execution are embedded with material and structural colonialities. These include:

- **The contradiction of its foreign policy and national approach to indigenous rights:** Canada's ODA outlines various projects to enhance indigenous rights in countries across the Majority World (IUCN, 2024). Yet in Canada, while there has been a degree of focus on indigenous rights, historical injustices - especially the implementation of the legal frameworks that protect the First Nations, Inuit, and Métis children, youth and families - remain inadequately addressed.

- **Canada's arms exports:** Canada is one of the world's top arms exporters, with significant deals with Saudi Arabia, known for their human rights violations and involvement in the Yemen conflict. Despite being a signatory to the Arms Trade Treaty, which aims to prevent transfers contributing to human rights violations, Canada (like Sweden) has prioritised its economic interests over human rights. Activists and scholars have also pointed out Canada's contracting foreign policy concerning Israel's genocide of the Palestinian people (Ayyash, 2024). While the Government has issued a freeze on arms exports to Israel, its motion does not cover freezing existing export permits (Ayyash, 2024). Prior, Canada had authorised at least CAD 28.5 million in permits for military exports to Israel during the first two months of its genocidal operation (Ibid).

Netherlands Feminist Foreign Policy

Summary

The Netherlands first signalled its interest in an FFP in 2019, but efforts to formally launch one catalysed it in 2021 when parliamentarians made a formal recommendation to the government. The government has subsequently taken steps to develop its FPP, including consultations and an international conference on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly. International policies on gender equality are not new to the Netherlands, and it was one of the first states to prioritise spending on gender equality, the rights of LGBTIQ+ people, and direct funding of women's rights organisations.

Implementation

Currently, the government is basing its development of the Dutch FFP on four R's (Govt of the Netherlands, 2022):

- Rights – women all over the world must be able to claim their universal rights and know that they are safeguarded from violence.
- Representation – they must be represented and take part in political decisions
- Resources – there must be sufficient resources to achieve these goals
- Reality check – circumstances differ around the world, and a particular approach will not have the same effect everywhere. Therefore, we must implement our policy goals in a way appropriate to the local context.

Analysts have argued that the Dutch FPP has been 'quietly' underway, with the government investing substantially in the 'four Rs' (Zwinkels, 2023); indeed, being

the biggest donor to gender equality in 2022 (Donor Tracker, n/d). However, in 2024, the government announced its intentions to cut ODA by €1 billion over five years, and its funding priorities appear to be shifting away from a women's rights lens.

Challenges

Dutch civil society organisations heralded the opportunity of an FPP but offered cautions based on its current direction: "it could turn into a meaningless policy if paramount issues – such as decolonisation, oppressive elements of religious traditions, patriarchal structures, harmful gender norms and roles, power relations, etc. – are not addressed by the Dutch FFP (Cordaid, 2024)." Our analysis highlighted the following challenges and contradictions:

- **A persistent emphasis on Dutch economic interests in ODA:** This emphasis is brought to light by phrases such as "persuade the Dutch business community to invest more," "strengthen our competitiveness," and "access to new markets for Dutch businesses." Similar to Canada, narratives like this reinforce colonial patterns, in which development assistance is used to advance the economic interests of the country that is providing the help.

- **A focus on business partnerships to advance imperialism and neocolonialism:** Dutch ODA significantly emphasises forming partnerships with Dutch companies and the possibility of financial gain. Although private sector engagement can be useful, placing an excessive amount of dependence on it can marginalise communities' voices and requirements, which may, in turn, worsen existing inequities (Hickel et al., 2022).

- **The Netherlands' arms exports:** the country is one of the world's biggest exporters of arms (Tufts University, 2025). The country has actively participated in the Afghanistan, Iraq wars and enabled conflict in Somalia, Yemen, Pakistan, and India through its arms deals. The Netherlands also supplied fighter jets to Israel during the ongoing genocide of Palestine, contravening the guidance in international law. Despite the International Court of Justice's ruling that there is a plausible genocide being perpetrated on Palestine, the Netherlands has consistently sided with Israel (Leeuw, 2024).

United States' Foreign Policy

Summary

Relative to its economy, the U.S.' ODA is low, at 0.24% of GNI in 2022 and provisionally as well in 2023, placing the United States 25th among OECD Development Assistance Committee members (ODA tracker, 2024). According to the Government's official website, its foreign policy includes a 'Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy', based on its 2021 National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality. In 2022, the US released a "Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally" and "Strategy for Global Women's Economic Security", based on this foundational approach.

Implementation

These strategies outline several principles and approaches, which largely cover women's economic empowerment and entrepreneurship, valuing care work, promoting human rights, addressing barriers to participation and rights, and addressing violence against women and girls. These policies also call for an intersectional approach, considering the areas of overlapping discrimination that affect women's rights, including gender, race, class and disability. In 2023, USAID and the Department of State's Gender Equity and Equality Action Fund invested $2.6 billion in gender equality programmes (USAID, n/d), although they have not delineated which was spent internationally and nationally in all areas. This included at least $100 million through the Gender Equity and Equality Action Fund; d $449 million to tackle urgent challenges women are facing in food and water systems; $303 million in development, multilateral, and security assistance for Women, Peace, and Security-related activities; and $369 million on Gender Based Violence programmes (USAID, n/d).

Challenges

With Donald Trump elected as the 47th President in 2025, and under his executive orders, currently, most USAID funding has been frozen and is under review. However, we highlight that the U.S.'s foreign policy often contradicts USAID policies. For example:

- **Funding for promotion of democracy while building alliances with authoritarian regimes**: While the US promotes democracy and human rights, it also funds militarisation and wars in many countries, including such as Afghanistan, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, and Palestine. They also maintain alliances with authoritarian and violent regimes such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pinochet's regime in Chile during the Cold War and Israel and their ongoing genocide in

Palestine. Feminist scholars argue that this contradiction reflects a patriarchal prioritisation of state power over human dignity, reinforcing a hierarchy where women's and minority peoples' rights become secondary to geopolitical interests (Tickner, 1992, 1994; Prugl, 2014). From a decolonial standpoint (Quijano, 2000; Mignolo, 2011), the US foreign policy's selective democracy promotion can be seen as a tool of coloniality, where certain authoritarian and violent regimes are supported to maintain strategic interests. This sustains a neo-colonial influence over nations by placing them within a hierarchy of acceptability for US allyship.

- **Support for human rights whilst violating them:** The US often advocates for human rights, yet its military interventions have led to massive loss of life; violence against people and their communities; huge destruction of ecosystems; and systemic oppression, e.g. in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and Libya. Critics argue that these interventions, which are sometimes justified on humanitarian grounds, tend to prioritise geopolitical and economic interests over genuine human rights concerns (Hunt and Cristina, 2001). For example, military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan were partly justified on human-itarian grounds, yet local women's rights organisations observed that these interventions led to intensified violence, insecurity, and instability, including for women (Ibid). The US has also been quietly involved in 'regime change' in countries across Latin America, Asia and Africa, leading to destabilising consequences not just on nations but on human rights (Ibid).

- **Promoting international institutions vs taking unilateral actions:** The US was instrumental in founding international institutions and often advocates for global governance. Yet, it continues to act unilaterally when multilateral approaches do not align with its interests. For example, vetoing ceasefire resolutions in the UN; withdrawing from agreements like the Paris Climate Accord, the Iran Nuclear Deal, and implementing a unilateral trade measure – the Inflation Reduction Act. Feminist critique highlights how US foreign policy's disregard for international agreements undermines collective approaches needed to address issues that disproportionately impact women, such as climate change, health, and security (Tickner, 2004).

- **The US' arms exports:** According to Who Arms War? The US is the biggest supplier of arms in the world, directly contributing to wars and conflicts in many countries. Israel has been the leading recipient of US foreign aid. Since the October Hamas attack, the US enacted legislation that assures direct military aid to Israel, amounting to at least 12.5 billion till 2028 (Masters and Will, 2024). The US has enabled, empowered Israel in its genocide in Palestine.

> While USAID guidelines talk of women, peace and security, the actions of the state are in stark contrast to their commitments to gender equality.

UK Foreign Policy

Summary

In 2023, former Foreign Secretary David Cameron issued a [White Paper on International Development](). It identified three core goals for UK ODA: eradicating poverty, tackling climate change and addressing biodiversity loss. The UK has increasingly aimed to mainstream gender equality in its broader foreign policy, especially since adopting its first National Action Plan on Women, Peace & Security (2018-22). This is based on an understanding that gender equality contributes to peace, security, and development.

Implementation

The UK government has continued to produce plans in line with gender equality aims. It renewed its approach to Women, Peace and Security with a [second action plan]() from 2023 to 2027. It also released a new [International Women and Girls Strategy]() from 2023-2027. One major component is a commitment to ensure that 80% of bilateral ODA targets gender by 2030. The following pillars are core to the strategy:

1. Standing up for women's and girls' rights and freedoms globally and bilaterally
2. Emboldening/ amplifying the work of diverse grassroots women's organisations and movements
3. Targeting investment towards the key life stages for women and girls
4. Acting for and with women and girls impacted by crises and shocks
5. Strengthening systems that play a critical role in protecting and empowering women and girls

In 2022, the UK was the fifth largest ODA donor, spending US$4 billion, or 57%, of its bilateral ODA, on activities that targeted gender equality in a principal or significant way, above the DAC average of 42%.

Challenges

Ongoing cuts to aid budgets have impacted gender equality programs, with funding reductions for initiatives on gender-based violence and reproductive health. Our analysis of the UK's foreign policy, in light of its commitments to women's and girls' rights, finds:

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- **Gender equality vs feminist principles**: UK foreign policy instrumentalised gender equality to achieve broader strategic aims, rather than treating it as an end (Guerrina, 2012). This is evident in the emphasis on women's participation in peacebuilding and economic growth, often framed to enhance stability and promote economic development, serving UK interests, rather than the needs of women in the Majority World (Ibid). For example, the UK's promotion of women's participation in Afghanistan's peacebuilding has been heavily critiqued for focusing on short-term, at times unsustainable, outcomes that align with Western security interests.

- **Feminist geopolitics vs securitisation:** Feminist scholars argue that the UK's approach to gender equality in foreign policy is often selective, emphasising rights in certain regions while overlooking others where it has significant strategic or economic interests (True, 2012). This selectivity is a form of 'feminist geopolitics' where the UK advocates for gender rights in contexts that align with its international image while disregarding oppression in allied nations (Ibid)

- **Neo-liberal women's empowerment:** The UK's focus on gender equality frequently adopts a neoliberal framing of women's empowerment, emphasising economic participation as a pathway. Critics argue that this emphasis on market-based solutions, such as promoting women's entrepreneurship, often neglects structural inequalities and overlooks the socio-political dimensions of gender-based oppression (Cornwall, 2007).

- **The white saviour complex:** Like the other nations discussed above, the UK's foreign policy approach to gender often reflects colonial legacies, where the Minority World is positioned as the liberator of 'oppressed' women in the Majority World, reinforcing harmful norms and unequal power dynamics. The UK's gender agenda reproduces a 'white saviour' narrative, wherein western standards of gender equality are imposed on diverse cultural contexts, disregarding local women's agency and indigenous frameworks for gender justice (Mohanty, 1988).

- **Tokenistic vs. transformational changes:** In Pakistan, UK-funded initiatives often emphasise women's participation in the labour force but fall short of addressing more transformative gender justice issues, such as inheritance rights or access to local governance. This narrow focus fails to tackle inequality's underlying structures (Cornwall et al., 2007).

- **Reinforcing coloniality of language**: In Bangladesh, UK aid initiatives for educational development have emphasised English language acquisition, viewing it as an essential skill for global competitiveness. However, this approach could contribute to erasing the use of Bengali in academic and professional spaces, reducing cultural identity to Western norms and perpetuating linguistic dominance (Rahman et al., 2012).

The hypocrisy of feminist foreign policies and violations of Palestinian women's rights

The aforementioned sections have illustrated that the donor countries under review have promoted either feminist or gender equality-focused foreign policies, while concurrently supplying arms to Israel. These arms deals are ultimately enabling Israel's perpetration of physical and structural violence against women and girls in Palestine and, very plausibly, genocide. Given the contradictions, a section of this report must be dedicated to addressing them. Whether it is nations with explicit FFPS (Sweden, Canada, Germany and the Netherlands) or those with significant ODA goals in gender equality and addressing violence against women and girls (the United States and United Kingdom), they are both silent on and complicit in the plight of Palestinian women.

These nations have offered, largely, unwavering support for Israel and its military actions in both Gaza and the West Bank since 2023, despite their being assessed by leading human rights organisations, women's rights organisations, scholars of international law and genocide as genocidal actions (Amnesty, 2024; MSF, 2024; UNOHR, 2024). Further, the International Court of Justice has assessed these actions as a plausible genocide, and Israel has been asked to take several actions by the court by which they did not comply with (OHCHR, 2024). Finally, a number of these countries have repeatedly vetoed ceasefire resolutions, aiming to halt the violence and ensure access to basic medical and food supplies to prevent loss of life. These diplomatic actions are in stark contrast with feminist foreign policy and the principles of gender equality and gender justice more broadly. The Israeli occupation and blockade of Gaza, mass-scale murders and incarceration of Palestinian men, women and children are realities that these FFP frameworks fail to address. The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls has pointed out that gendered violence is central to Israel's military actions in Palestine: "*It's very clear that Israel has been targeting Palestinian women as part of its project of destroying the Palestinian people in whole and sparing no means to achieve this objective*" (Rahman, 2024). According to data from the United Nations Human Rights Office, as of one year into Israel's genocidal actions in

Gaza, around 70% of the Palestinians killed were women and children (UNOHR, 2024). Palestinian women continue to face systematic displacement, violence, starvation, mass environmental destruction and socioeconomic marginalisation.

This illuminates a tension between rhetorical commitments to justice and geopolitical priorities. It sheds light on the racism towards Palestinians by their former colonisers and their allies. Those who continue to supply arms to Israel, despite evidence of their use in violations of international law, cannot legitimately claim to be champions for gender equality, nor advise other nations about how to achieve it. The selective application of human rights principles is an extension of colonial white supremacy, which serves the function of maintaining the oppression of racialised people and their communities in the Majority World.

Landscapes of development funding and decolonising possibilities: Case Studies

Case Study: Bangladesh

Bangladesh is a relatively new sovereign nation, as described in section 3.1. Since its independence, the country has experienced periods of political instability, including coups and eras of military rule. In 2024, the government led by Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was toppled. A peaceful student-led protest, met with a violent government response, led to widespread public unrest and the toppling of the government.

The gender justice movement in Bangladesh is primarily led by community and grassroots organisations, which are often funded by ODA, either through grants from national organisations or directly by foreign institutions.

Interviews revealed two significant ways that foreign funding is impacting the feminist movement in Bangladesh: i) conditionalities which precipitate colonial institutional structures, governance and norms; and ii) funding for programmatic models that are designed externally and serve the reputational or institutional interests of the donor country. These findings are consistent with critiques elevated in the broad feminist and decolonial literature.

Conditionalities which precipitate colonial institutional structures, governance and norms

Interviewees B1 and B3 described how organisations receiving foreign aid have, as part of grants, been encouraged to partake in **exercises of 'institution building'**. Hence, these organisations become structured by institutional stand-ards established by donors and their cultural contexts. They are increasingly capacitated of applying for ODA funding calls, which are typically designed by the donor agency with pre-set objectives. Interviewees described how these organisations are then considered 'ODA-ready'. Next, they tend to reach out to communities or social movements at the grassroots to implement programmes to meet these pre-set objectives. This is a top-down process rooted in structural coloniality: the donor typically sets the agenda as a funding conditionality. Interviewees pointed out that grassroots feminist organisations rarely receive support with core funding, and so are beholden to this colonial funding model. Without core costs to run organisations, they are beholden to project funding and have limited space to define key programmatic and advocacy priorities towards their long-term vision and theory of change.

Another element of this structural coloniality is the presence of **an in-country regulatory framework** called the NGO Affairs Bureau. This regulatory body grants permissions to NGOs to apply for foreign funding, oversees the flow of funds, and ensures taxation. It acts as a coordinating agency between the state, the funder, and the receiver.

In principle, this Bureau serves as an important accountability mechanism for effective governance. However, the interviewees revealed that the Bureau often operates exploitatively, echoing colonial times' structural barriers and norms. Post-colonial South Asia is deeply entrenched in colonial administrative governance (Hull, 2012). Many governments operate in paper-based systems, making administration extremely challenging and slow, including in Bangladesh. Interviewees explained that the NGO Affairs Bureau places overwhelming paperwork demands on organisations to attain clearance just to apply for foreign funding calls. This has forced a practice of networking with bureaucratic officials to reduce paperwork and fast-track applications, and there are regular reports of bribes to get quicker approvals – a practice that became entrenched in colonial times.

According to the interviewees, once organisations have approval, access to foreign funding usually follows two streams: firstly, through social networks

and secondly, through competitive bidding.[2] The **social network approach** is inherently colonial, through its restrictive access for certain elites. Only those elites are invited to the spaces where key relationships and opportunities can be accessed, e.g., conferences, events, and dinners. They also tend to have relative class privilege and are typically located in the nation's capital, Dhaka. Most of the country's community and grassroots organisations and networks are not Dhaka-based, so they do not have the same access to these spaces. Secondly, in these relationship-based opportunities, the elites who access them tend to have greater flexibility and less administrative burden to access the funding.

For the second stream – **competitive bidding** - NGOs must prove their capacity to meet specific standards, predefined by the ODA donor and the NGO Affairs Bureau. For example, a set 'overhead' where a particular budget is ring fenced for admin functions and wider 'indirect costs'. Indeed, while this is a good practice for organisations, many grassroots organisations have not had many opportunities to access the 'core funding' that enables a practice in managing indirect costs. Interviewees shared that in their experiences, ODA grants are sometimes underpinned by a generalised assumption that organisations have core funding to cover their indirect costs, hence limiting the amount that can be ring-fenced into grant applications, favouring expenditure on direct project activities. This means that organisations must have raised some core funding or been in business for a specific time to be eligible for ODA. The irony is that the compliance and regulatory nature of funding is cumbersome, and this usually is an indirect cost requiring non-project staff time to deliver on (e.g. administrative staff). Interviewees shared that funders are increasingly creating or re-inventing donor compliance requirements, so every penny needs a paper trail. They emphasised that this contradiction has severely impacted the quality of work, as programmatic staff must deliver these extra bureaucratic requirements. As a result, staff who work on these projects are often overworked and underpaid. On top of this, ODA funding tends to pay local staff the national average, but international staff doing the same jobs receive an international pay package, even in an international NGO. This is a profoundly colonial practice because it perpetuates a discursive and material hierarchy where non-locals' time and work are valued more, and international staff are enabled with a more outstanding quality of life and opportunity.

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2. Testimonies shared by B1 and B3

Funding for programmatic models that are designed externally and serve the reputational or institutional interests of the donor country

Interviewees particularly emphasised how climate justice-focused ODA is premised on donor country interests. For example, funding from the Netherlands often prioritises **the application of Dutch knowledge** about water management and climate governance over the local knowledge of Bangladeshi communities, which is much more appropriate to the geography and political ecology of the country.[3] To illustrate this, B1 pointed out that the elevated land model of flood prevention used in Amsterdam was imported to Bangladesh. Bangladesh is an entirely different delta with natural siltation, making the Dutch model irrelevant. Dutch consultants were paid to import this model through ODA – effectively channelling the funding back to the Netherlands. According to B1 and B2, and backed by much academic and grey literature, Bangladeshi communities have their indigenous ways of climate adaptation that are not recognised as scalable or fundable under the current ODA funding of the Netherlands.

The white saviour complex is obvious in ODA-funded projects in Bangladesh, because a common requirement for compliance is that local recipient organisations **publish the donor's logo across all financed activities**. Photographic evidence is needed as part of compliance reporting. B1 mentioned the example of USAID, whose budgets on advertising and branding are more than the programme activities. The mandate of printing USAID logos in all materials is a constant reminder to the Bangladeshi people of the generosity of the American people. B1 and B3 argued that doing these short-term projects while spending large resources on branding and advertising creates more inequalities in communities than alleviating poverty.

Case Study: India

> *"In India, to truly work on social impact, you need funding to sustain". Participant I1.*

This often comes from foreign donors due to the country's limited domestic resources. However, the gender politics in India is currently dealing with significant consequences of an increasingly "authoritarian and hyper-masculine state that is shaping the national contexts" (Kundu and Chigateri, 2024) This context has led to increasing shutdowns of CSO spaces and crackdown on dissent, which is "systematically dismantling of women's rights—backlash" (Ibid)

3. Testimonies shared by B1 and B2

Conditionalities which precipitate colonial institutional structures, governance and norms

India has recently ramped up **regulatory measures that limit funding for domestic NGOs**, most notably with the Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act (FCRA) (Dasgupta, 2024). First enacted in 1976 and substantially revised in 2010, the FCRA imposes registration requirements and spending restrictions on NGOs receiving foreign donations (ICNL, 2022). Amendments in 2020 further tightened these rules by banning sub-granting among FCRA-registered organisations, capping administrative costs, and centralising control of foreign funding under the State Bank of India in New Delhi and the Ministry of Home Affairs (Dasgupta, 2024). One of the impacts has been reduced employment in the social sector and hampered service delivery to vulnerable communities, where civil society was playing a key role in filling public service gaps (Ibid). More and more NGOs are losing their FCRA licenses, with escalating economic and human impacts (Trivedi, 2022). According to government data, "*35,488 NGOs have either been cancelled or expired and were not renewed... Only 15,947 NGOs currently hold active licenses*" (Tripathi, 2025). These restrictive conditions limit how nonprofits can fund their efforts.

Three interviews were conducted with local NGO workers to understand their experiences of the ODA landscape and implementation. Each has extensive experience collaborating with international funders, government agencies, and grassroots organisations. Four **recurring themes were identified: livelihoods, health, gender-based violence (GBV), and a growing focus on climate justice**. All noted a pervasive gap in addressing caste.

Their work has frequently involved UK, Germany, and Southeast Asia funders. Limited domestic support means foreign funding becomes crucial for organisations. As one interviewee, I1 explained, "*resources are very small and limited in the country*," so foreign donors are seen as "*more supportive, punctual, and can provide sustainable funding.*" Such funding offers vital benefits covering operational costs, ensuring program continuity, and enhancing organisational visibility.

Shifting Priorities, Complex Compliance

Participants noted that ODA often advances last-mile service delivery, innovative projects, and system-wide accountability, leaving work focused on gender equality underfunded. Where it is funded, **it is often tied to objectives defined top down by the donors, which don't account for the overlapping forms of discrimination and exclusion** that women, girls and gender minorities face. One

interviewee, I2, highlighted that *"it is not an open-ended approach - programs are restricted by the call for proposals,"* making it challenging to address intersectional issues. The "Bell Bajao!" (Ring the Bell!) campaign, focused on violence against women (VAW), stands out as one success story that emerged from a grassroots organisation. The campaign calls on men and boys to identify and address VAW. It was eventually scaled up nationally and across different South Asian contexts through the support of international donors. The longevity and impact of the campaign are related to its emergence from the needs and understandings of grassroots feminists in India.

All three respondents observed that **foreign funding is inaccessible due to strict compliance requirements** such as child safeguarding, anti-harassment policies, procurement standards, and due diligence checks. The respondents do not object to high standards of ethics, safeguarding and accountability, but note that how they are implemented tends to uphold coloniality through top-down power relations between donors and local partners. "The donor can reject and approve funding," remarked I1. Additionally, respondents mentioned the FCRA-specific hurdles referred to earlier as barriers, such as mandatory electronic filings, overhead limits and stringent spending guidelines. I1 & I3 further described struggling with the ESE portal and other country-specific compliance demands that can overwhelm smaller NGOS.

Caste, Religion, and Community Perceptions

In tackling caste, religion, or tribal issues, respondents noted that **donors tend to avoid being direct about a politically sensitive topic** and prefer to use generalised language such as 'systematically oppressed'. I1 and I2 both pointed out that issues of caste and religion are not addressed openly. To navigate this, some organisations partner with local governance bodies such as the Gram Panchayat, a village-level self-governance structure, to address intersectional challenges such as gender and health care. This can involve bridging systemic gaps in accessibility, providing safe spaces for women, and challenging local customary practices that oppress marginalised communities.

Respondents discussed community perceptions of foreign-funded work, especially work related to GBV or caste. One interviewee, I2, who described having 14 years of experience with foreign funding, noted that, *"communities often view foreign funding with scepticism, creating a power differential that impacts project acceptance."* Sometimes, **communities see NGO staff as outsiders or fear that the project drives a foreign agenda** that is not cognisant of local norms or needs. This mistrust can lead to resentment, hostility and backlash to specific

projects and programmes, with broad impacts such as preventing future work on the topic or affecting the security of the people involved in implementing or participating in them.

Power Dynamics and Funding Autonomy

All respondents emphasised that funders hold a significant balance of power in the relationships and use this, often, to prioritise external agendas or transactional outcomes, as underscored by I2 and I3. I2 added that the power is rooted in resource ownership, "*there is always one person who has more money than the other and one who's more needed than the other*". Local organisations also have to navigate a gap in understanding local realities and are **forced to navigate aligning donor directives with those realities**, "*you tend to tweak some of the objectives...changing the language so it does not impact your results,*" I1 explained. In many cases, this undermines autonomy as it entails negotiation or compromise to ensure crucial local issues, like addressing mental health or offering legal support to those participating in projects, can still make it into proposals, even if funders take issue with finding them hard to measure.

Case Study: Kenya

> "*Africa is different, we are facing different challenges and very unique challenges...*" Respondent K1.

The foreign funding mechanisms in Kenya are formed by rigid conditionalities that often reinforce the bureaucratic systems, governance models, and institutional hierarchies shaped by coloniality. Through our interviews, we understood how these manifest through i) due diligence requirements rooted in colonial structures, governance and norms, and iii) Power dynamics in project design and rigid reporting and accountability mechanisms hamper authority and drive western interests. These power dynamics perpetuate coloniality, dictating the foreign funding available to Kenyan civil society.

Conditionalities which precipitate colonial institutional structures, governance and norms

Interviewees referred to an inherent coloniality of the due diligence requirements of foreign funders. In practice, they reported that such requirements tend to perpetuate exclusions against marginalised communities, "*due diligence processes assume neutrality, but they are built on colonial accounting standards. When you're questioning why a sex worker group's bank account name is different*

from their organisational name, without realising they legally can't register under that name, you're already excluding them", shared K1.

Power dynamics in project design, and rigid reporting and accountability mechanisms, that hamper authority and drive Western interests

In the interviewees' experiences, donors retain control over programmatic decision-making, reinforcing colonial power dynamics and hampering autonomy. When discussing the governance structures of foreign-funded projects, participants K2 and K3 revealed how decision-making is rarely fully transferred to the local partner organisations. K2 stated, *"The funder has all the say, "* reflecting the donor organisations' top-down, hierarchical nature and financial disbursements. This rigidity prevents autonomy and actively undermines the partner's grassroots work. *"When you do things without their approval, that is counted as an ineligible expense, and they ask you to pay it back. So you have to wait for their permission, even if the situation requires immediate action",* added K3. Often, this would mean a delay in immediate support to the affected organisations or immense bureaucratic hurdles in getting approval on time.

Interviewee K2 noted there is typically a racialised lens to the distribution of funding and also trust, emphasising that *"white governments will trust white companies"* and only organisations led by white people can easily access funding opportunities. This reproduces the white supremacy inherent in coloniality and positions African feminist organisations as subordinate implementers rather than the agenda setters. Minority World institutions, or white-led African institutions, control resources, monitoring and knowledge production. The coloniality of knowledge is stark in the ways expertise is defined and controlled by the Minority World. K2 recounts an experience with a funder-appointed evaluator with no context or methodological expertise, stating, *"this lady had never come to East Africa before... she had only evaluated projects in farming and livestock."* Additionally, she was unfamiliar with qualitative feminist work, yet her assessment still determined the project's viability. This reflects how epistemic authority remains Eurocentric, where local knowledge is devalued in favour of external "experts" who often lack insight into the local socio-political context and complexities.

Interviewees K3 and K5 shared how foreign donors often prioritise their programmatic agendas that advance their political and institutional interests. According to K3, *"...right now there's so much money around climate justice work, which is great, but also it limits other places that need support. So really is it responsive to the local context?".* Interviewees reflected that donors often fail to prioritise gender-equality work areas, even when they are what communities define as

urgent. This disconnect usually leads Kenyan grassroots organisations to reshape their work to fit the foreign funding criteria. Often, the program objectives and successes are based on quantifiable, time-bound indicators rather than long-term structural transformations. Another topic brought up was sudden funding withdrawal, which left the communities in precarious situations and reinforced a structural cycle of dependence. K4 shared, *"They want to fund a project for one year, then move on. But people don't stop being queer after one year. People don't stop needing support."*

Moreover, as shared by K4, Western accountability structures such as audits, financial reports, and strict funding conditions are imposed as a universal model of good governance. These systems fail to recognise localised reporting mechanisms rooted in community relationships.

Recommendations

For ODA donors, Governments, Private funders, Philanthropy and INGOs:

→ **Recognise that structural racism is real and exists in funding** - it is a collective responsibility for all stakeholders to dismantle it.

→ **Seek and invest time in fostering meaningful relationships with local partners and grantees. These** must be non-extractive, non-hierarchical working relationships rooted in respect for local knowledge and perspectives.

→ **Pay the same remuneration package to local people that is paid to 'expat' hires** - Reassess the need to hire them for positions abroad and reflect on whether the 'need' is seen through a white supremacist, colonial lens.

→ **Prioritise flexible funding for feminist movements** – start now, urgently, to address gender injustice, underdevelopment and inequality.

→ **Recognise the colonial legacies and harm that foreign aid has caused nations** and start to work on reconceptualising development funding as reparations.

→ **Create spaces to reflect on embedding transformative change into funding streams** - especially centring marginalised voices and those living at the intersections of identities such as caste, class, religion, gender and sexuality. Value local knowledge and integrate it into programmatic funding.

→ **Reduce the structural barriers to accessing funding,** ensuring that grass-roots NGOs and networks are eligible to apply for funding without needing to become more 'Western '.

→ **Simplify accountability and compliance mechanisms for grantees. De-centralised** accountability mechanisms, ensuring that community voices

are central to them . Redistribute decision-making powers, giving local organisations and communities more autonomy.

→ **Encourage local NGOs to hold you to account, question and challenge power dynamics without fear of losing funding** - Be open to criticism and evolve accordingly.

→ **Alongside local advocates, call for more accessible and better functioning regulatory mechanisms** that promote transparency and efficiency without overwhelming and excluding smaller, women-led organisations and networks.

For International NGOs and Private Philanthropy:

→ **Be mindful of communication materials. Adopt** an anti-racist and decolonial lens in all internal and external communication.

→ **Adopt clear milestones to transfer power and resources** to the Majority World feminist organisations and networks, being mindful of coloniality in the space. Be aware of the process of reducing investments in Minority World offices and expanding in Majority World movements.

→ **Consult and co-create—Engage** grassroots experts and organisations on key issues and co-create programmatic, advocacy, and influencing work with local partners.

→ **Promote and encourage decolonial research** - centring the voices of the communities, especially those living at the intersections. Use the research for policy advocacy and programmatic change.

→ **Discourage the practice of white feminism in deciding or influencing feminist causes and funding priorities** - actively listen to and centre southern feminist voices and experiences in funding streams.

→ **Go beyond tokenistic and performative 'Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion' policies and practices.** Hire Majority World people in senior leadership and decision-making roles and give them space to make decolonial, anti-racist, feminist, institutional change. Reflect on who holds power in the organisation and shift access to the most marginalised in decision-making.

→ **Avoid the tokenistic use of 'localisation'** to defend neoliberal approaches to funding.

→ **Evaluate partnerships with local organisations to accommodate their needs. Adopt** mutually acceptable, accountable, and supportive leadership and approaches.

→ **Hold governments accountable for their complicity in the genocide of Palestine. Otherwise**, your funding efforts to address different forms of injustice will be understood as hollow and hypocritical expressions of geopolitics and coloniality.

→ **Trust local NGOs and communities to identify needs and make appropriate decisions**.

Conclusions and Way Forward

This research has elevated insights into the enduring colonial logics and rationale embedded in foreign funding policies in Kenya, India and Bangladesh. Germany, Sweden, Canada and the US have adopted feminist foreign policy frameworks, while the UK and the Netherlands have adopted gender-equality-focused foreign policies. Yet, their implementation, demonstrated through a literature review and he lived experience of local feminist practitioners, overall tends to operate as neo-liberal, neo-colonial vehicles for reinforcing structural and financial dependencies. Furthermore, they undermine and negatively impact local feminist organisations and networks. Through this research, we have highlighted the inherent racism and hypocrisy of Western nations in promoting 'Feminist' or gender-equality-focused foreign policies while continuing to profit off the arms trade being used to actively destroy communities of the global majority and entire regions of the Majority World.

As shown through this research, constraints imposed by myopic, project-based funding models, restrictive donor conditionalities, overwhelming regulation and heavy reliance on compliance depoliticise gender justice from a very Western lens. This research reveals how contemporary aid structures embed material and structural colonialities. Rather than driving transformative change, current structures often replicate the inequalities they claim to address, perpetuating neo-liberal and neo-colonial paradigms.

Decolonising foreign funding requires a tectonic shift from hierarchical donor-recipient relationships to funding models rooted in feminist movements from the Majority World, their local agency and autonomy. This would mean prioritising long-term, flexible and unrestricted funding that empowers southern feminist movements to define their agendas rather than adapting to Western ideals of feminism and gender equality. Western nations and donor agencies must reevaluate their role in sustaining colonial power imbalances in existing funding models. By doing this, they will be able to adopt decolonial participatory funding mechanisms rooted in the struggles and resistance of communities from the Majority World that have faced and continue to face intergenerational colonial power asymmetries. By creating spaces of transformation, funding agencies have immense potential to value and centre the voices of the most marginalised. There is hope and possibility that by challenging the entrenched structures of development finance, feminist movements in Kenya, India, and Bangladesh will reclaim their agency and chart their trajectories, free from the constraints of neocolonial funding regimes.

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Annex 1: Details of Research Process

Particulars	Date (from)	Date (to)	Details
Review of existing literature	20 Sep 2024	20 Oct 2024	Reviewed existing literature on foreign funding policies and their impact and influence on the Majority World, exploring theoretical frameworks that informed this research. Compiled a detailed review of the literature that guided this project.
Decolonial analysis of ODA strategies of the UK, US, Canada, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands	20 Oct 2024	15 Nov 2024	All three researchers looked at two countries each for this review and analysis. Informed and guided by the literature review, the three researchers thoroughly analysed ODA strategies. This revealed the various material and structural colonialities embedded in the ODA funding for development to Kenya, India and Bangladesh.
Finalising the in-depth interview questionnaire and reaching out to recruit research participants	15 Nov 2024	10 Dec 2024	An in-depth interview questionnaire was developed following the literature review and decolonial analysis of ODA strategies. Research interviewees were recruited using snowball sampling.
In-depth Interviews	15 Dec 2024	Jan 2025	In total, 15 interviews were conducted across three countries. Profiles of the interviewees are as follows: **India: 5 interviews** • I (1): Works in a local NGO on women survivors, which receives foreign funding and has operational FCRA. • I (2): Works in the field of foreign and development aid for over 14 years. • I (3): Works in a local NGO and has experience with • I (4): have experience working with gender-transformative tools in South Asia. They work in strategic partnerships and have experience working directly on donor mandates, as well as with UK and US donor organisations. • I (5): Has experience serving on legal boards and is the CEO of their feminist organisation in India. They have expertise in securing foreign funding, including retail foreign funds and institutional funding. Their skills include drafting proposals, finalising contracts, fundraising, and managing related paperwork.

			Kenya: 7 interviews • K(1): Works in the development space. Is a founder and mobiliser on a large feminist collective with a presence in over four counties in Kenya • K (2): A feminist activist who works as a diplomatic representative for the Kenyan government as a youth envoy in Nairobi, Kenya. • K (3): A feminist and woman in political discourse. Organises and mobilises grassroots women in Kisumu and Kibera, Nairobi, Kenya. • K (4): A data scientist who works in international development in Ethiopia, Kenya and Cameroon • K (5) KL: Works in the women's rights and feminist space. Is in senior leadership at an INGO in Kenya. • K (6): Works in the feminist space and LGBTQ+ spaces. Is a founder and in senior leader of an NGO in Nairobi, Kenya • K (7): Works in women's rights and feminism. Is a founder and in senior leadership at an NGO in Nairobi, Kenya **Bangladesh: 5 interviews** • B (1): Works in the international development space. In a senior leadership position at an INGO in Dhaka, Bangladesh • B (2): Works in a local NGO that receives foreign funding. The main objective of the NGO is to provide free and subsidised legal aid to women who experience violence. • B (3): Works in a local NGO that receives foreign funding. The organisation works on issues of women and disability. • B (4): Consent withdrawn • B (5): Consent withdrawn
Final Report			**28 February 2025**

Annex 2: ODA Funding Strategy Review and Analysis Template from a Feminist Decolonial Lens

Introduction

Objective: Provide an overview of the analysis framework to critically assess the ODA (Official Development Assistance) funding strategies of the UK, US, Canada, Sweden, Netherlands and Germany towards international development in India, Kenya, and Bangladesh.

Scope: This template is designed to identify and analyse colonialities in the funding strategies, highlighting material and structural colonialities underpinning these strategies, and suggesting areas for decolonisation from a feminist perspective.

Feminist Decolonial Review Framework

A. Power Dynamics and Agenda Setting

1. **Analysis Question:** How are the priorities set in the ODA funding strategies?

   - Are local actors involved in decision-making?
   - How are the goals aligned with or imposed upon the local context?
   - Spotting Colonialities:
     - Look for top-down approaches where donor countries set the agenda without adequate local consultation.
     - Identify instances where local knowledge or priorities are marginalised in favour of donor priorities.
   - Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
     - Conditionalities are attached to funding that force recipient countries to adopt specific policies or programs.
     - Lack of transparency in decision-making processes, often controlled by donor countries.

B. Gender Equality and Feminist Foreign Policy

1. **Analysis Question:** How is gender equality framed within the ODA strategy?

   - Does the strategy align with feminist foreign policy principles?
   - Are intersectional and context-specific gender issues adequately addressed?
   - Spotting Colonialities:
     - Examine if gender equality initiatives are implemented in a one-size-fits-all manner without considering local cultural, social, and political contexts.
     - Identify the presence of Western-centric gender norms/ideas being imposed on local communities.
   - Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
     - Funding is tied to Western concepts of feminism, ignoring or undervaluing local feminist movements and practices.
     - Programs that fail to address the intersectionality of gender with race, class, caste, etc.

C. Funding Allocation and Conditionalities

1. **Analysis Question:** How is funding allocated, and what are the conditions attached?

   - What are the criteria for funding distribution?
   - Are there restrictions that limit the autonomy of recipient countries?
   - Spotting Colonialities:
     - Investigate if funding is allocated in ways that reinforce donor dominance (e.g., prioritising projects that align with the donor country's geopolitical interests).
     - Analyse conditions that may restrict the recipient country's ability to use funds as they see fit.
   - Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
     - Conditions requiring the procurement of goods and services from donor countries.
     - Restrictions on the use of funds limit the flexibility of recipient countries to address their specific needs.

D. Local Participation and Representation

1. **Analysis Question:** How are local voices and communities represented in the ODA process?

   - Are local NGOs, women's groups, and communities involved in the planning and implementation of funded projects?
   - How is local knowledge and expertise valued?
   - Spotting Colonialities:
     - Look for tokenistic inclusion of local voices that do not translate into meaningful influence.
     - Assess whether local knowledge is sidelined in favour of 'expert' opinions from the donor country.
   - Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
     - Projects are designed and implemented without meaningful input from local communities.
     - Over-reliance on expatriate staff for project implementation, undermining local capacity.

E. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Accountability

1. **Analysis Question:** How are projects monitored and evaluated?

   - What metrics are used to measure success?
   - Who is responsible for accountability, and to whom are they accountable?
   - Spotting Colonialities:
     - Examine if evaluation criteria are set by donors without considering local definitions of success and progress.
     - Check for accountability mechanisms that primarily serve the interests of the donor rather than the recipient.
   - Examples of Material/Structural Colonialities:
     - Imposing Western standards of success that may not be relevant or appropriate in the local context.
     - Donor-driven evaluations that prioritise accountability to donor taxpayers rather than to the beneficiary communities.