

# Reimagining India's Foreign Policy Through a Feminist Lens: Prospects and Challenges

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## Abstract

This paper examines the prospects and challenges of reimagining India's foreign policy through a feminist lens by situating it within broader debates on progressive foreign policies. It argues that while Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), largely developed in the Global North, emphasizes gender equality, inclusivity, and human security, it often reproduces entrenched global power hierarchies. In contrast, India's foreign policy, shaped by postcolonial priorities such as sovereignty, anti-racism, and self-determination, presents an alternative normative framework but remains limited in addressing gendered concerns. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory, the study critically explores the intersections and tensions between these approaches. Through a discourse-oriented analysis of India's multilateral engagements, particularly within the United Nations system, it demonstrates how gender, race, and colonial legacies continue to shape policy narratives. The paper further identifies pathways for reimagining India's foreign policy through a context-sensitive feminist approach. It concludes that while such a transformation holds significant potential, it is constrained by structural and institutional challenges.

**Keywords:** Feminist Foreign Policy; India; Postcolonialism; Gender Equality; Intersectionality; Diplomacy.

## 1. Introduction: Why Reimagine Foreign Policy?

Foreign policy has traditionally been shaped by realist ideas that prioritize state sovereignty, territorial security, and strategic interests. While this approach has guided international relations for decades, it often overlooks the social dimensions of policy outcomes, particularly the unequal impact on marginalized groups (Tickner, 1992, p. 14). In recent years, this limitation has led to the emergence of alternative frameworks, among which Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) has gained increasing attention. FFP seeks to shift the focus from state-centric security to human security by emphasizing gender equality, inclusivity, and justice (Thompson & Clement, 2019, p. 3).

However, FFP, largely developed by Global North countries, is not free from criticism. Scholars argue that it sometimes reproduces existing global hierarchies by presenting Western norms as universal standards (Parisi, 2020, p. 6). In contrast, India's foreign policy has evolved within a postcolonial context, emphasizing sovereignty, anti-racism, and self-determination. These principles have enabled India to position itself as a voice of the Global South, yet its policy framework often remains limited in addressing gender concerns (Ganguly, 2010, p. 52).

This creates a critical gap between progressive intent and actual practice. On one hand, FFP attempts to foreground gender but may reinforce power imbalances; on the other, India challenges global inequalities but tends to overlook gender as a structural issue. Therefore, reimagining India's foreign policy requires

bringing together feminist insights with postcolonial perspectives. This paper explores this intersection and argues that a context-sensitive feminist approach can offer a more inclusive and balanced framework. The following sections outline the theoretical basis, methodology, and key arguments of the study.

## **2. Literature Review: Competing Visions of Progressive Foreign Policy**

### **2.1 Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP)**

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) has emerged as an alternative approach to traditional foreign policy by placing gender equality and human well-being at the centre of international engagement. Rather than focusing only on military strength or economic gain, FFP highlights the importance of representation, rights, and resources in shaping policy outcomes (Thompson & Clement, 2019, p. 5). It seeks to ensure that women and marginalized groups are not only protected but also actively included in decision-making processes. In this sense, FFP attempts to redefine the meaning of security by shifting attention from the state to individuals and communities (Tickner, 1992, p. 36).

### **2.2 Critiques of FFP**

Despite its progressive intent, FFP has been subject to several criticisms. One major concern is the gap between symbolic commitment and actual practice. While states may adopt feminist language in official policies, their actions often remain unchanged, especially in areas such as defense and trade (Parisi, 2020, p. 9). Another critique relates to the dominance of Global North perspectives in shaping FFP. Scholars argue that these models tend to universalize Western experiences and overlook the socio-political realities of the Global South (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, p. 324). As a result, FFP can unintentionally reinforce existing global inequalities instead of challenging them.

### **2.3 Postcolonial Feminism**

Postcolonial feminism offers a useful framework to address these limitations by emphasizing the intersection of gender with race, class, and colonial history. It challenges the idea that feminist solutions developed in Western contexts can be applied universally (Mohanty, 1988, p. 65). Instead, it calls for a more context-sensitive approach that recognizes the diverse experiences of women in postcolonial societies. This perspective is particularly relevant for countries like India, where historical and cultural factors shape both domestic and foreign policy priorities.

### **2.4 Research Gap**

Existing literature provides valuable insights into both FFP and postcolonial feminism, yet there is a noticeable gap when it comes to integrating these perspectives in the context of India's foreign policy. While India's external engagements emphasize sovereignty and global justice, they rarely incorporate gender as a central concern (Ganguly, 2010, p. 58). Therefore, there is a need for research that critically examines how a feminist lens, informed by postcolonial realities, can reshape India's foreign policy in a more inclusive and meaningful way.

## **3. Theoretical Framework: A Postcolonial Feminist Lens**

This study adopts postcolonial feminism as its theoretical lens to better understand the limits and possibilities of reimagining India's foreign policy. While mainstream feminist approaches have made important contributions by highlighting gender inequality, they are often rooted in Western experiences and assumptions. Postcolonial feminism addresses this limitation by focusing on how gender intersects with colonial history, race, and socio-economic conditions in the Global South (Mohanty, 1988, p. 67).

This makes it particularly relevant for analyzing India's foreign policy, which has been shaped by its colonial past and its ongoing engagement with global hierarchies.

A key concept within this framework is intersectionality. It suggests that individuals do not experience inequality in a single dimension, but through overlapping structures such as gender, class, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 149). Applying this idea to foreign policy allows for a more nuanced understanding of how international decisions affect different groups in different ways. It moves beyond a one-size-fits-all approach and highlights the need for context-sensitive analysis.

Another important aspect is the role of power and discourse. Foreign policy is not only about actions but also about how states present their priorities and identities through language. Discourse shapes what is considered important and who is seen as a legitimate actor (Tickner, 1992, p. 41). In this sense, examining official statements and policy narratives becomes crucial.

Based on these ideas, this paper develops an analytical model that compares Feminist Foreign Policy in the Global North with India's postcolonial foreign policy. This comparison helps to identify both overlaps and tensions, and provides a framework for imagining a more inclusive approach.

#### **4. Methodology: Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis**

This study follows a qualitative research approach to explore how gender, power, and postcolonial concerns are reflected in India's foreign policy. Rather than relying on numerical data, qualitative analysis allows a deeper understanding of meanings, narratives, and interpretations within policy texts. In particular, the study uses Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to examine how language shapes and reflects power relations (Lazar, 2007, p. 143).

The primary data for this research includes official speeches delivered by Indian representatives at the United Nations, along with selected foreign policy documents and statements. These sources are important because they reveal how India presents its priorities and positions in global forums. Discourse matters in this context because it not only communicates policy but also constructs identities and defines what issues are considered important (Fairclough, 1995, p. 54).

However, this approach has certain limitations. Since the analysis focuses on language, it may not fully capture the gap between policy statements and actual practices. In addition, the selection of texts may influence interpretation. Despite these constraints, FCDA remains useful for uncovering hidden assumptions and power structures within foreign policy narratives.

#### **5. Feminist Foreign Policy: Normative Promise and Structural Limits**

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) has been presented as a progressive shift in the way states engage with the world. Its primary goal is to move beyond traditional security concerns and focus on human well-being by promoting gender equality, inclusivity, and social justice. In practice, FFP emphasizes three key elements representation, rights, and resources aiming to ensure that women and marginalized groups are actively involved in decision-making processes (Thompson & Clement, 2019, p. 7). This approach challenges the idea that foreign policy should be driven only by military or economic interests.

In terms of achievements, FFP has helped bring greater attention to issues such as women's participation in peace processes, gender-based violence, and inclusive development. Some countries have also increased the representation of women in diplomatic roles and have incorporated gender-sensitive policies into their international engagements (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, p. 327). These developments suggest that FFP has the potential to reshape global priorities in a more equitable direction.

However, these gains are often accompanied by hidden contradictions. One key concern is the gap between policy commitments and actual practices. States that promote feminist values may still pursue strategic interests that undermine these principles, such as arms trade or selective humanitarian interventions (Parisi, 2020, p. 10). This raises questions about whether FFP is always a genuine transformation or sometimes a form of political branding.

Another limitation lies in the issue of power hierarchy. Since FFP has largely been developed by Global North countries, it often reflects their perspectives and priorities. As a result, it may unintentionally reinforce global inequalities by presenting Western norms as universal standards (Mohanty, 1988, p. 69). Therefore, while FFP offers a promising framework, its impact remains constrained by deeper structural dynamics.

## **6. India's Foreign Policy: Postcolonial Strength, Gendered Silence**

India's foreign policy has been deeply influenced by its anti-colonial past and the experience of colonial domination. After independence, India sought to promote principles such as sovereignty, non-interference, and racial equality in international relations. These ideas allowed India to position itself as a strong advocate for justice and fairness, particularly among newly independent states (Ganguly, 2010, p. 49). This postcolonial orientation continues to shape India's global engagement and diplomatic identity.

In this context, India has often been seen as a leading voice of the Global South. Through platforms such as the Non-Aligned Movement and the United Nations, it has emphasized issues like development, equity, and the rights of developing countries (Mohan, 2015, p. 112). This leadership role reflects India's commitment to challenging global inequalities and promoting a more balanced international order.

However, despite these strengths, there remains a noticeable gap in addressing gender within India's foreign policy. Gender issues are rarely treated as central concerns and are often framed within broader development agendas rather than as structural inequalities (Pant, 2016, p. 78). This creates a form of "gendered silence," where the importance of gender is acknowledged but not fully integrated into policy frameworks.

This leads to a tension between India's normative commitments and its strategic priorities. While India advocates for justice and equality at the global level, its foreign policy decisions are often guided by security concerns and geopolitical interests. As a result, gender considerations tend to remain secondary, limiting the scope for a more inclusive and transformative approach.

## **7. Discourse Analysis: India in Multilateral Arenas**

India's engagement in multilateral arenas, especially within the United Nations, provides an important site for understanding how it presents its foreign policy priorities. In these forums, India consistently emphasizes themes such as justice, equality, and development, positioning itself as a representative voice of the Global South. Its statements often highlight the need for a fairer international system that addresses the concerns of developing countries (Ganguly, 2010, p. 61). This discourse reflects India's broader postcolonial commitment to challenging global inequalities.

However, a closer analysis of these narratives reveals certain limitations, particularly in the way gender is framed. While India occasionally refers to women's empowerment and gender equality, these issues are usually placed within the context of development rather than treated as independent structural concerns. Women are often portrayed as beneficiaries of policy initiatives, rather than as active participants in

decision-making processes (Tickner, 1992, p. 45). This framing limits the transformative potential of such discourse.

The issue of representation further highlights this gap. Although India supports inclusive development at the rhetorical level, there is limited emphasis on ensuring equal representation of women in diplomatic and policy-making spaces. As a result, gender remains a secondary concern within broader policy priorities.

From a feminist perspective, discourse is not merely descriptive but also constitutive of power relations. The way issues are framed determines what is considered important and who is recognized as an agent of change (Fairclough, 1995, p. 58). Therefore, India's multilateral discourse, while progressive in tone, continues to reflect underlying hierarchies that constrain a more inclusive approach.

### **8. Reimagining Pathways: Toward a Context-Sensitive Feminist Policy**

Reimagining India's foreign policy through a feminist lens requires moving beyond critique and identifying practical pathways for change. This section forms the core contribution of the study, as it brings together insights from feminist and postcolonial perspectives to suggest a more inclusive policy framework. Rather than adopting a ready-made model, the focus should be on developing an approach that is sensitive to India's specific historical and social context.

One important step is the integration of gender mainstreaming into foreign policy processes. This means that gender considerations should be included at every stage of policy design and implementation, rather than being treated as an afterthought (True, 2012, p. 109). Such an approach can help ensure that policies address the diverse needs of different groups.

Another key area is inclusive diplomacy. Increasing the participation of women and marginalized communities in diplomatic roles can improve both representation and decision-making. Research suggests that diverse teams often bring broader perspectives, which can lead to more balanced outcomes (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016, p. 330). In addition, development cooperation can be strengthened by focusing on gender-sensitive programs that support education, health, and economic opportunities.

At the same time, it is important that India does not simply replicate models developed in the Global North. As postcolonial feminist scholars argue, policies must reflect local realities rather than universal assumptions (Mohanty, 1988, p. 71). Therefore, an India-specific feminist framework should combine global principles with local priorities, creating a balanced and context-driven approach.

### **9. Structural Challenges and Constraints**

While the idea of reimagining India's foreign policy through a feminist lens offers significant promise, it also faces several structural challenges. One major barrier lies within institutional frameworks. Foreign policy institutions are often shaped by long-standing practices and hierarchies that resist change. Decision-making processes tend to remain centralized and are not always open to alternative perspectives, including gender-sensitive approaches (True, 2012, p. 115).

Patriarchal norms further reinforce these institutional constraints. Despite progress in many areas, gender biases continue to influence both domestic and international policy environments. These biases can limit the participation of women in leadership roles and reduce the visibility of gender concerns in policy discussions (Tickner, 1992, p. 52). As a result, efforts to integrate feminist ideas may face both overt and subtle resistance.

Another important challenge relates to security priorities. In a complex geopolitical environment, India often focuses on issues such as border security, regional stability, and strategic competition. These concerns tend to dominate policy agendas, leaving limited space for alternative approaches that emphasize human security and social justice (Pant, 2016, p. 91).

Finally, there is a gap between policy commitments and actual implementation. Even when gender equality is acknowledged in official statements, translating these ideas into concrete actions remains difficult. This implementation gap highlights the need for stronger institutional support and accountability mechanisms.

### **10. Conclusion: Reimagining Between Possibility and Constraint**

This paper has examined the idea of reimagining India's foreign policy through a feminist lens by bringing together insights from feminist and postcolonial perspectives. It has shown that while Feminist Foreign Policy offers a promising framework by emphasizing equality, inclusion, and human security, it is not free from limitations. At the same time, India's foreign policy, shaped by its postcolonial experience, presents an alternative vision of global justice but continues to give limited attention to gender as a structural concern.

The analysis highlights a key tension between progressive intent and practical outcomes. On one side, global feminist approaches may reproduce existing hierarchies, and on the other, India's policy framework often remains gender-neutral in ways that overlook deeper inequalities. This suggests that neither approach, on its own, is sufficient to address the complexities of contemporary global politics.

Therefore, a hybrid approach becomes necessary. Reimagining India's foreign policy requires combining feminist principles with postcolonial sensitivity, ensuring that global ideas are adapted to local realities. Such an approach can create space for more inclusive and balanced policy-making without ignoring strategic concerns.

In conclusion, feminist reimagining is both necessary and challenging. It holds the potential to make foreign policy more just and responsive, but its success depends on how well it engages with existing structures and context. A careful, context-driven approach remains the most effective path forward.

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