



Interview with Dr. Hannah Neumann, Member of the European Parliament

Conducted by Cristiana Lavinia Badulescu, Co-Managing Director, YFPF Brussels

Dr. Hannah Neumann explains why feminism should guide the EU's foreign policy while calling for a gender and diversity focus on the EU institutional culture.

As a member of the European Parliament since 2019, you are committed to human rights, peace, and feminism. What motivates you to advocate for these issues? And what does it mean from your perspective to be a feminist nowadays?

Political decisions get better the more diverse the people are who make them. This is especially true when we speak about questions of war and peace and deal with deeply divided societies, as I often do in foreign policy. However, when looking at who is making decisions in this field – on the EU side as well as in the countries themselves – it is mostly men. We are losing out a lot. My mission is to change this and to make foreign and security policy as diverse as our societies are. If this makes me a feminist – well, then I am one. But let me be clear on one thing – speaking in the words of the wonderful bell hooks: feminism is more than fighting for gender equality. It means to stand up for an end to sexist oppression and exploitation while being very aware of other forms of oppression, such as racism, ableism, and classism. Or, in my own words: I do not want to just change the quota of female representation, I want to change the system that made such discrimination possible for so many centuries.

You have recently declared that the “F-word” – feminism – needs to guide the EU's foreign policy into the 21st century. Why do you think feminism should guide the EU's foreign policy? What does a feminist foreign policy mean to you? What makes it feminist?

A feminist foreign policy puts the usual way of policymaking and the existing balance of power into question. It challenges the fact that you can literally bomb your way to negotiation tables, nowadays, while those advocating peacefully for change remain excluded. It challenges the fact that the military can solve societal conflicts. And it challenges the fact that women and other minorities may be allowed to hold side-events, but rarely make it to the main negotiation tables, when ceasefires are being negotiated and peace deals made. The starting point of a feminist foreign policy is an inclusive way of policy-making that puts gender equality at its very heart and prioritizes the human rights of women and other marginalized groups. In times where the very foundation of multilateralism is put into question through chauvinist and aggressive policies, an intersectional feminist foreign policy can not only help addressing systemic institutionalized sexism: it offers a completely new vision of international relations, because it is deeply rooted in the conviction that there cannot be any peace without gender equality.

Studies show that if women are present at the negotiation table during peace talks, the resulting agreement is 35% more likely to last at least 15 years. Studies also have proven that the more gender-equal a country, the less prone it is to engage in violent conflict. Still, if you look at pictures from security summits, you can count the women present on the fingers of one hand, most of the time. Why is it, that in 2020, we still do not have a single EU mission that is led by a woman? That is one thing a feminist foreign policy for the EU aims to change. We need more women at the negotiation tables, more women as ministers of defence and foreign affairs – and an EU foreign policy that includes gender equality in all its different fields.

At present, you are the rapporteur for the European Parliament's report on feminist foreign policy –

officially entitled [Gender Equality in the EU's Foreign and Security Policy](#). The report calls on the EU and its member states to commit to advancing towards a foreign and security policy that incorporates, on the one hand, a “gender transformative vision, putting the need to address unequal structures and power relations at its centre” and, on the other hand, “an intersectional perspective.” Could you elaborate on the challenges and opportunities that such a vision of foreign and security policy could bring to the EU?

Looking at the current state of play, we still have a long way to go and many glass ceilings to break. Foreign and security policy has always been a male-dominated field and the EU seems to play along, sending mostly male delegations and accepting all-male negotiation tables. The text that I have put forward together with my Spanish colleague, Ernest Urtasun, demands a shift towards more women in peace and security. This will not only ensure that the potential of so many talented women working in the field will no longer be wasted, but also help create peace treaties that have a better chance at lasting. However, it is not only about representation. We also need to make substantial progress in terms of financial resources. That is why I am advocating for at least 85% of the EU's official development assistance to have gender equality as an objective, among other things. And in many countries around the world, we also need to fight laws that continue to discriminate against women and keep them from exploring their full potential. It is still a long way to go. And on the way, we should not forget that different types of discrimination seldom occur on their own. It is highly likely for a person to be affected by sexism and racism at the same time. This is why we should base our foreign policy on the differing realities and living conditions that people experience.

The report on feminist foreign policy also calls for “a gender and diversity focus on the EU institutional culture at headquarters and delegations.” How do the EU's own services look at the present time from a gender and diversity perspectives? What are the main issues?

Attempts at gender parity exist at EU level. But while we do have a nearly balanced Commission this time, most EU services are still lagging. One example is the European External Action Service (EEAS). Even though its staff consists of 47.4% women and 52.6% men, the glass ceiling is still firmly in place: In the highest pay grades, women account for only 12% of employees, and when it comes to the director level, their number is marginal. At the European Union Military Staff (EUMS), it is a similar story: Only 22 out of 176 employees listed in the personnel directory are female, and of those, 12 serve as secretaries or assistants. Finally, there is the issue of the EU delegations, where we are also still far from having achieved gender parity. However, there is also the broader aspect of diversity, which in the EU currently seems only to be understood in terms of gender. Yet the undisputable whiteness of the EU institutions firmly persists. This is why we also need an intersectional approach, which allows us to tackle marginalization from different angles. Member states can join us in our quest to diversify the EU personnel further by suggesting candidates coming from different backgrounds. Another way is by introducing quotas, which are a very helpful tool to help accelerate achievements in terms of gender balance and overall representation.

What would be your main advice for our audience of young professionals interested in gender-related topics? What can we do to support gender equality?

I would say that it is very important to stay informed and to develop a critical way of thinking. One can quickly be inclined to assume that we do not need feminism any longer since women have equal rights on paper in our part of the world. If one is to look at the numbers, there is however a completely different story to tell. Let's take again the makeup of the EU's Foreign Service as an example. To put it bluntly, what else other than sexism can it be if women remain stuck in the role of secretaries, while mostly men are the ones who head EU delegations? A gender- and diversity-sensitive human resources policy can help in such cases to create a more inclusive working environment. It is a myth that there are no qualified women for the job. The same goes for the typical “all white & male” panels, which, by the way, we can still see way too often in Brussels. If diversity is important to you, you will always find ways to include other voices. When I travelled to the Arabian Peninsula as head of a delegation, for instance, I refused to travel with an all-male team, and – after some struggle – we were two women ... What message would it have sent to women in Saudi Arabia if we, as the EU, give the impression to not even have women in politics? Striving for a more inclusive way of doing foreign policy should be on everyone's agenda. In the end, it is about refusing to accept the status quo. It is about reflecting on its deficiencies, being vocal about them and building alliances. And it is about putting forward ideas to change it. That is what I am doing, with many others, and our coalition is steadily growing.



Dr. Hannah Neumann is the Peace and Human Rights Coordinator for the Greens / EFA Group, Vice-Chair of the Human Rights Committee (DROI), Member of the committees on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and Security and Defense Policy (SEDE), as well as Chair of the Delegation for Relations to the Arabian Peninsula (DARP) at the European Parliament. Hannah Neumann's academic career in media sciences and peace and conflict studies brought her to Ilmenau, Berlin, Manila and Monrovia. Before joining the European Parliament, she was a self-employed expert and consultant for peace projects, i.e. in projects for the United Nations, the Society for International Cooperation, the European Commission, the German Council on Foreign Relations and aid organizations. She advised ministries and non-governmental organizations on campaigns on anti-discrimination, promotion of democracy, climate protection on the local level and human rights. From 2013 until 2016, she worked as policy advisor in the German Bundestag.