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Local Feminist Perspectives as Transformation Levers for Greater Gender Equality

Synthesis Study

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Bonn 2025

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Abbreviations

EU	European Union
FFP	feminist foreign policy
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (German Agency for International Cooperation)
HIV	human immunodeficiency virus
HLPF	High-Level Political Forum
IDOS	German Institute of Development and Sustainability
IR	international relations
LGBTQIA*	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender
NGO	non-governmental organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
UN	United Nations
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women
WPS	Women Peace and Security

Executive summary

The global landscape of gender equality is increasingly being challenged by armed conflicts, the worsening climate and environmental crises, autocratisation and anti-gender campaigns. In most parts of the world, girls, women, LGBTQIA* communities and other marginalised genders are not only prone to be victims of violence, but their active participation in politics and decision-making is also limited and made insignificant. Sweden introduced the first feminist foreign policy in 2014, followed by others, including Germany in 2023, which adopted a feminist approach in their development and foreign policies. The idea of incorporating gender sensitivity into development and foreign policy is not a new concept though, as it may refer to a range of initiatives that prioritised the involvement of females and other marginalised genders in development processes by challenging traditional gender binaries. Feminist policies – despite claiming to adopt a post-colonial, anti-racist and intersectional framework – are frequently criticised in academic scholarship and by practitioners for their potential inapplicability to diverse contexts in partner countries and for perpetuating paternalistic or neo-colonial behaviours. Considering the recent trend of right-wing policies in influencing politics all over the globe, discourses in research on feminist policies raise critical questions about its limitation and institutionalisation. In this context, we introduce local feminist perspectives with this study as having the potential to act as transformation levers for greater gender equality by producing context-specific alternative approaches to development processes that address prevailing gender norms and practices.

A set of criteria was developed – based on factors of gender (in)equality, geography/world region, civil society landscape, the socio-political and socio-economic situations in and of the countries – for the selection of the partner countries to inform our understanding of local feminist perspectives. This synthesis study builds on the expertise, knowledge and experiences of the colleagues from three partner organisations in Ghana, India and Ukraine. The aim of the synthesis is to identify the common patterns and differences among various local feminist perspectives and researchers, while also facilitating a conversation between different local feminist perspectives and scholarship on foreign and development policies following feminist agendas. Furthermore, we want to inquire about gender norms, practices and structural barriers that hinder gender-transformative policies, and seek to uncover often overlooked local feminist perspectives in the national context (see Roy, 2016). The study then further explores how these local perspectives can offer alternative approaches to development processes, improve women's, girls' and LGBTQIA* persons' access to resources, and improve their effective participation in political processes and decision-making. Overall, these questions aim to understand how local feminist knowledge and experiences can be utilised to create more inclusive, equitable and sustainable development strategies.

We also took into account feminist calls for reflection upon inherent power asymmetries in knowledge construction and how methodological choices contribute to the study's qualitative framework. As methodological considerations of this synthesis study, along with a feminist ethic, we focused on participatory action research while applying an inductive and explorative approach. When we approached the partner organisations with the idea of a commissioned study on local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality, we deliberately avoided further conceptualising local feminist perspectives, transformation levers and gender equality. Instead, we see the main conceptual contribution of this synthesis study as exactly this: the synthesising of the case studies prepared by the partner organisations, their conceptualisation and the applications of such terms. Accordingly, this study does not present a conceptual framework in detail, but we have prepared a table (Table 1) with our definitions of the most relevant concepts and terms necessary to analyse local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality. As part of the synthesis section (Section 2), we discuss and reflect the partners' approaches and contextualise them against the backdrop of scholarly debates in feminist research. These discussions then build on the case studies

prepared by the partner organisations and can adapt, concretise, complement or correct our initial ideas.

Using this participatory action research approach, the study highlighted the contributions of the partner organisations and their respective research participants. Through various workshops in Ghana, India as well as in Germany, exchange and mutual learning between partners and the team at IDOS was fostered. The approach also aligns with action-oriented research approaches by addressing the root causes of gender inequalities and seeking to influence systematic structural levels. All three case studies prepared by the partner organisations provided the empirical basis for this synthesis study, which further conceptualises and contextualises their findings. The partner organisations all interpret and frame "local feminist perspectives" differently, given the diverse (cultural) contexts that their feminist studies are situated in and reflect upon, due to the various thematic foci as well as varying scalar analyses. The Indian study follows a grassroots approach while focusing on two thematic lines: women and health as well as women and climate action. The Ukrainian study concentrates on feminist perspectives in Ukraine in the time of war and defence. The Ghanaian study deals with gender-transformative legislative and political frameworks in the country over the last 30 years. The same counts for "transformation levers", which are approached differently by the case studies prepared by the partner organisations, depending on the socio-political context. This synthesis study takes these differences as a starting point to identify broader thematic lines, questions and outlooks with a view towards gender-transformative change.

The synthesis seeks to go beyond a pure summary of three case studies and the specific (local) context of the different feminist perspectives to identify common themes, challenges and opportunities with a view towards gender-transformative change. Its objective is to show how relevant local feminist perspectives are to understand feminisms and their influence on developments at different levels. The synthesis is conducted along clustered criteria by combining deductive (from theory) and inductive (from the material) processes. Through this approach, we deduced five clusters and 13 criteria, which, while grounded in specific national contexts, provides socio-economic, political and structural insights into structural dynamics that are transnational in nature. The 13 criteria, which can be categorised into five clusters, are as follows:

- **Intersectionality** explains intersecting forms of discrimination and barriers to gender-transformative approaches;
- **Special characteristics of local feminisms and gender (in)equalities** combine various descriptive and analytical criteria, including specific sectoral focus, study insights, contextual factors, local interpretations of feminism(s) and feminist agendas, gender (in)equality characteristics, structural factors and the difference between discursive and action levels;
- **Multi-directional flow of norms** entails connections to various academic debates; incorporates references from global, regional and local discourses on norms and diversities of cultures; and considers the impact on (global) discourses on feminism(s) as well as the influence of external or donor-driven factors;
- **Challenges and opportunities for gender-transformative change** includes the criteria of implementation methods, transformative opportunities and limitations. Collectivisation, alliance-building, and the highlighting of gender inequality interconnections were mentioned as strong tools to formulate a shared future vision;
- **Future of gender-transformative policies** incorporates criteria for global and regional trends and transitions, conclusions, (policy) recommendations as well as topics for future research.

The analysis reveals that a consistent theme in all the case studies prepared by the partner organisations concerns the challenges faced by local feminist perspectives in influencing policy, decision-making and gender norms, stemming from limited opportunities and restricted possibilities. Considering these analyses of local feminist perspectives, this synthesis study proposes the following policy recommendations as transformation levers towards more gender equality:

- **Investing in gender-responsive infrastructure:** The Ukrainian study formulates clear recommendations on the investment in infrastructure (childcare facilities, nursing care homes, women's shelters and gender-based violence support centres) that explicitly address gender equality by considering the needs of women and other marginalised genders, thereby promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities.

- **Advancing research and data collection:** The Indian study also recommends the collection and accessibility of disaggregated data on gender statistics through an intersectional approach, with a particular focus on the dimensions of religion, caste and gender. This data is crucial for understanding the nuanced experiences of different groups in order to inform targeted interventions and increase awareness about gender inequalities. Intersectional approaches need data on intersecting forms of discrimination.

- **Promoting nuanced intersectional understandings of feminism(s):** The studies emphasise intersectionality and inclusivity and advocate for a more nuanced understanding of feminism(s) for tailored feminist approaches. This includes recognising the role of digital activism and the need for systemic changes to address gender-based violence and enhance women's political representation. It is also required to explore the intersections of anti-democratic movements and anti-gender campaigns to better understand their mutual reinforcement, as this understanding is critical for designing effective initiatives to promote gender equality.

- **Mapping feminist movements and contributions:** All three studies express the need for more research on feminist movements and feminist contributions to societal change, given the limited knowledge in three thematic and regional foci chosen by the partners for their study, namely women and health, women and climate action (in India), feminist perspectives in times of defence and recovery (in Ukraine), and gender-transformative policies (in Ghana).

- **Facilitating advocacy for networks via cooperation:** The Ghanaian study stresses the need to provide flexible funding to facilitate advocacy, mobilisation and networks that is not tied to projects' specific objectives. The funding should facilitate the development of transnational networks and solidarity aimed at promoting gender equality and equity. The study underscores the importance of addressing cultural, structural and systemic barriers to women's rights and representation.

- **Applying context-sensitive approaches to feminist agendas:** A convincing strategy for implementing feminist policies, in both external and domestic affairs, is to adopt context-sensitive approaches that assess whether the country is more open to feminist agendas or dialogues on – and cooperation for – human rights or political participation for all genders. Overall, feminist development and foreign agendas offer to base approaches more on human rights and less on economic and geopolitical concerns.

All case studies prepared by the partner organisations highlight the phenomenon of gendered time poverty as a significant issue that needs to be taken into account by policymakers with the aim to alleviate this burden through support mechanisms that recognise and value care work as (economic) work. They also suggest considering the multi-directional flow of norms, between different levels, from the local to the international/transnational. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers can create more inclusive, context-sensitive, and effective feminist development and foreign policies for advancing gender equality and empowerment for all genders across diverse regions.

1 Introduction: content and methodological embedding

The space for the rights and participation of women and other marginalised genders is shrinking across the world. The levels of violence against women, girls and LGBTQIA* (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, and asexual/aromantic/agender) communities remain high, and their effective participation in formal and informal political processes and decisions is increasingly limited, persecuted or prohibited. The reasons for this can be found in the dominating patriarchal systemic-structural conditions and respective gender norms and practices, which constitute barriers to sustainable, gender-transformative developments (Marcus & Somji, 2024). The intensifying backlash against women's and marginalised genders' sexual and reproductive health and rights diminishes the outlook for gender equality, as called for by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on gender equality and SDG 10 on inequalities. Indeed, the 2024 SDG Gender Index report goes as far as stating that gender inequality could be worse in 2030 than in 2015, when the goals for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development were set (Equal Measures 2030, 2024). Amidst the increasing number of armed conflicts, the worsening climate and environmental crises, autocratisation processes and "anti-gender campaigns" (Butler, 2024), the outlook for gender equality is bleak. The backlash against "gender" forms part of a "larger restoration project" (Butler, 2024, p. 15) favouring patriarchy; "natural", traditional, religious orders; and heterosexual marriage while restricting transsexual identities and abortion rights. Against this background, this study introduces local feminist perspectives as having the potential to produce context-specific alternative approaches to development processes that address prevailing (gender) norms and practices.

1.1 Studying local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality

This study is guided by an interest in the similarities and differences between local feminist perspectives. For that purpose, we highlight the relevance of local knowledge(s), experiences and perspectives for knowledge production on feminisms by feminists (see Nylund, Håkansson, & Bjarnegård, 2023). We offer an attempt to change perspectives, from an external observation to an (endemic) introspection of feminism(s) highlighting diversities and commonalities in different contexts. By going beyond nation-centric views, we seek to consider global and trans-national aspects of local, national and self-identities by particularly acknowledging marginalised voices (Roy, 2016). Through its focus on local feminist perspectives, this study follows an "epistemic vision of the study of development" (Sumner, 2022, p. 7) in the area of global development studies by going beyond a focus on so-called developing countries and stressing an interconnectedness between development issues across dichotomies in development studies. Furthermore, this study addresses certain gaps on local perspectives in the broader scholarship particularly through its multi-level and multi-scalar approach, with a focus on norms and different "local" contexts through a development cooperation lens (MacArthur, Carrard, & Willetts, 2021).

The research questions guiding this study are:

(1) How do existing socio-cultural norms and practices and the prevailing systemic-structural framework conditions prevent sustainable, gender-transformative policies?

(2) What are local feminist perspectives in the local/national context?

(3) Which alternative approaches to development processes can local feminist perspectives offer in order to target prevailing norms and practices?

(4) How can existing local feminist perspectives be used to increase women's, girls' and LGBTIQ* persons' access to services, infrastructure and resources and improve their effective participation in formal and informal political processes and decision-making in the respective country?

While research question (RQ) (1) stands for the problematising question, RQ (2) presents an explorative empirical question, RQ (3) deals with potential solutions and RQ (4) describes the transfer question. With this study on local feminist perspectives, we seek to contribute to scholarship on feminist development and foreign policy agendas (e.g. Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond, & Hedling, 2024, 2018; Aggestam & Bergman Rosamond, 2019; Friesen & Wisskirchen, 2022; Guerrina, Haastrup, & Wright, 2023; Thomson, 2022, 2024; Zhukova, Rosén, Sundström, & Elgström, 2022; Zilla, 2023, 2024) and the intersections between feminist and post-colonial approaches (Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023; Nylund et al., 2023; Parashar, 2016; Parashar & D'Costa, 2017). While referring to the findings of the case studies prepared by the partner organisations (Ohemeng et al., 2025; Sengupta et al., 2025; Strelnyk et al., 2025), with this study we want to address the criticisms about feminist development and foreign policy approaches being paternalistic and neo-colonial by illustrating how local feminist perspectives a) exist and b) hold a potential for informing transformative approaches to gender equality.

This synthesis study has been conducted as part of the research project "Local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality", which is funded by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) as a GIZ internal project, and by the German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), in cooperation with three partner organisations: the Gender Studies and Human Rights Documentation Centre (Ghana), the Goa Institute of Management (India) and Gender in Detail (Ukraine). This synthesis study relates to these three independent case studies (see the executive summaries in the Annex). The work builds on the expertise, knowledge and experiences of the colleagues from our partner organisations who have been working in academia and advocacy in the field of women's rights, gender equality and feminisms for years. All three case studies, prepared by the partner organisations, provide the empirical basis for this synthesis study, which further conceptualises and contextualises the findings.

When looking for partner organisations to commission a study on local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality, we made the decision to leave the conceptualisation of the core concepts of the study – "local feminist perspectives" "transformation levers" and "gender equality" – to the partners. We hoped that this conceptual openness would allow the partners sufficient space and freedom to shape and fill the concepts as they see fit for the context of their work. The fact that the three studies have framed and interpreted "local feminist perspectives" and "transformation levers" differently reflects the diverse socio-political and cultural contexts in which our partners are working, and the studies' different thematic foci and scalar analyses. Whereas the study on India follows a grassroots approach and focuses on two thematic lines – women and health as well as women and climate action – the study by the Ghanaian colleagues explores the gender-transformative legislative and political frameworks in Ghana, and the study on Ukraine analyses the significance of feminist perspectives in Ukraine during times of defence and recovery. This synthesis study takes these differences as a starting point to identify broader thematic lines, questions and outlooks for gender-transformative change.

We see the main conceptual contribution of this synthesis study as exactly this: the synthesising of the case studies prepared by the partner organisations, their conceptualisation and the applications of such terms. Although the study does not present a detailed conceptual framework, we have prepared a table with our definitions of the most relevant concepts and

terms necessary to analyse local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality. By discussing and reflecting upon the partners' conceptual contributions in the synthesis, we can adapt, concretise, complement and/or correct our initial ideas. In order to offer a clustered lens for identifying common themes, thematic lines and diversities, and to synthesise partners' contributions into broader conceptual insights on feminisms and gender-transformative change, we identified a matrix of 13 criteria grouped into five clusters:

1. Intersectionality
2. Special characteristics of local feminisms and gender (in)equalities
3. Multi-directional flow of norms
4. Challenges and opportunities for gender-transformative change
5. Future of gender-transformative policies

This research does not come without its limitations, particularly within the framework of participatory action research. Furthermore, this research needs to be seen as a momentary assessment of developments towards more gender equality due to the very dynamic and changing environments within which gender politics are taking place.

The study is structured as follows: Section 1 contextualises feminist approaches in foreign and development policies in academic and political debates, and summarises these broad lines of current debates and discussions to identify a research gap on local feminist perspectives and a missing focus on internal, endemic partner countries' perspectives in the debate. This section also introduces the former German "traffic-light" coalition government's post-colonial, anti-racist and intersectional approach to its feminist development policy (BMZ [German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development], 2023; German Federal Foreign Office, 2023) and glimpses into the feminist discourses of the three partners. Then, it introduces the methodological considerations leading the synthesis study, explaining its feminist ethic as well as participatory and transformative research. We reflect on our positionalities with a view towards this research and further describe the synthesis study as a method forming part of the qualitative case study research. Section 2 synthesises the main findings of the three partner studies and identifies potential entry points for local feminist perspectives to achieve transformative changes towards greater gender equality. The synthesis, conducted along clustered criteria, brings together the different research insights and findings from the studies conducted by the Ghanaian, Indian and Ukrainian teams as well as broader debates in feminist research. We conclude the synthesis study by discussing its main findings against the background of discourses in feminist activism, feminist research and development cooperation. In Section 3, we shed light on the main policy recommendations for diverse actors at different governance levels as well as point to areas for future research.

1.2 Where are we coming from? Guiding concepts and frameworks

Over the last years, the global trend of integrating feminist agendas into government policies as a strategy to promote gender equality in countries' foreign affairs and development cooperation has gained prominence. At the time of writing this study, Sweden, Canada, France, Mexico, Spain, Libya, Germany, Luxembourg, Chile, Colombia, the Netherlands, Argentina and Slovenia (UN Women [United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women], 2023) have (had) adopted a feminist foreign policy (FFP), which often encompasses a development policy portfolio; only Canada and Germany have separate FFPs and feminist development

policies (Friesen & Wisskirchen, 2022). This differentiation reflects a rather technical approach to policy interventions and is unlikely to make a difference to a partner country's perspective.

In order to critically examine the role of local feminist perspectives in offering alternative approaches to development, it is important to contextualise this trend within the broader framework of feminist policies, their underlying principles, global relevance and implementation challenges. We have chosen this scholarship as a point of reference for this study due to its emphasis on gender norms, transformative approach and geographical focus. The aim of this sub-section is to refer to the scholarship's work on elements of the study's guiding concepts and to demonstrate that local feminist perspectives – as transformation levers towards greater gender equality – are an aspect that need further attention.

1.2.1 Setting the scene: overview of scholarship on feminist approaches in development and foreign policies

To provide an overview of the broader scholarship on feminist approaches in development and foreign policies, we need a better understanding of what feminist development and foreign policies entail. From an academic, theoretical perspective, scholarship on feminist development and foreign policies is based on research on gender, gender in/and development,[1] women's studies and more broadly speaking on feminist theories, for example on feminist international relations (IR) (e.g. Cohn, 1987; Enloe, 1990; Hooper, 2001):

> [T]he agenda can broadly be understood as policies that focus a country's international engagements on gender issues through rhetoric, diplomacy, and development aid, among other vehicles. Underlying this approach is the belief that issues of gender equality shape every dimension of global stability and prosperity, from ensuring that peace deals last to lifting up global economies to protecting global health and beyond. (George, 2022)

The implementation of feminist development and foreign policies depends on the context and encompasses different approaches (Bernes, quoted in Wallin, quoted in Towns, Jezierska, & Bjarnegård, 2024, p. 1267). Although a gender-sensitive approach in development and foreign policies is not new, a feminist policy approach aims to go further by contesting existing (gender) binaries and addressing other dimensions of gender and social identities to develop an intersectional understanding of discrimination and marginalisation.

There exists a rich body of work on the conceptual, analytical and theoretical aspects of feminist development and foreign policies. While Partis-Jennings and Eroukhmanoff (2024) provide an overview of the critical debates around the institutionalisation of feminist and gender-focused ideas and norms in the last decade, Aggestam, Bergman Rosamond and Kronsell (2018) focus on the theoretical framework of FFPs and theorise FFP through a feminist IR theory and the ethics of care. Achilleos-Sarll et al. (2023), on the other hand, provide a methodological contribution by focusing on foreign policy analysis and feminist IR as a framework for analysing FFPs. Guerrina et al. (2023) introduce the analytical and methodological concept of "feminist power Europe" (in reference to "normative power Europe" by Manners, 2002) by deconstructing feminist frames in the European Union's (EU) external policies. Some scholars focus on Sweden's leading role and analyse the development and aspects of Sweden's FFP (Aggestam & Bergman Rosamond, 2019; Aggestam et al., 2024), the digital norm contestation in Swedish FFP and a critical discourse analysis of Swedish FFP in relation to post-colonial feminist theory

1 For further reference, consider Razavi and Miller's (1995) description of the shift of discourses and linked approaches, from "Women in Development" relying on liberal feminist school of thought and modernisation theory, to "Women and Development" informed by neo-Marxist and dependency theory, to "Gender and Development" referring to socialist feminist schools of thought.

(Nylund et al., 2023). Partis-Jennings and Eroukhmanoff (2024) provide an overview of feminist policy-making in multiple areas of policy and examine various gender-focused programmes that states and international organisations have undertaken in the last decade. The scholarship on the theoretical and analytical foundation of FFP paves the way for understanding and evaluating the discourses around feminist policies.

Several scholars examine the development of FFP by analysing the underlying strategies and narratives that shape and inform these policies. In this regard, Scheyer and Kumskova (2019) contribute to the scholarship with an analysis of FFPs and how they reflect an authentically feminist approach. A theoretical contribution by Uspenskaya and Kozlova (2022) introduces five factors that have influenced the development of FFP. The authors name (1) thinkers like de Pizan, von Suttner, Addams and their ideas on a world free of violence, (2) the International Congress of Women in 1915 and the International Congress of Working Women in 1919, (3) the scholarship of feminist IR, (4) norm entrepreneurs and (5) United Nations (UN) initiatives, for example the Women Peace and Security (WPS) agenda. Färber contributes empirically and theoretically to the scholarship with a focus on which actors are involved in the knowledge production around FFP and the reproduction of its narratives (Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023). Aggestam and True (2020) add an empirical and theoretical contribution with their research on strategies of the instrumentalisation of "gender" as a category in foreign (and development) policies. To the field of empirical/theoretical contributions belong the works by Zhukova et al. (2022) on the use of FFPs as strategic narratives while referring to IR theories of norm translation and strategic narratives. With their theoretical work on the question of whether an FFP can be undone, Towns et al. (2024) share reflections from Sweden and explore the sustainability of the Swedish FFP. The authors find three aspects concerning the governance of FFP that prevent the withdrawal from a feminist agenda: international law, decentralised foreign policy implementation as well as international role expectations (Towns et al., 2024, p. 1264). Accordingly, the authors also critically reflect on equalising FFP with the Swedish example, as "it was embedded in a web of international norms, institutions and agreements on women's rights and gender equality, hosted by regional and global organisations" (Towns et al., p. 1268). Feminist policies, unlike "traditional" policies, are grounded in historical feminist struggles and movements, which, upon effective implementation, become self-sustaining and less dependent on political or legal frameworks. With a focus on local feminist perspectives, we can address this gap in the literature of endemic, local understandings and discourses on feminism(s).

Other scholars in the field expand their analyses by identifying missing links and proposing frameworks that can enhance the formulation and implementation of feminist policies, in the local and international contexts. Achilleos-Sarll et al. (2023) elaborates on the missing link between FFP and the climate and environmental crises as well as on the absence of reflections on humans' relations with each other and the planet. Robinson (2024) attributes problems with FFP's implementation to the lack of epistemological and ethical frameworks as well as underlying presumptions that fail to sufficiently question colonial and hierarchical structures and rely on binary approaches that further perpetuate power imbalances. Kantola and Lombardo (2019) analyse the relationship between feminist politics and both left populism (in Spain) and right populism (in Finland), and they suggest that political matters for the implementation of feminist policies and left parties are more responsive to feminist ideas. With their article from 2020 on "Gendering Foreign Policy", Aggestam and True suggest a theoretical framework on gendering foreign policy that shall allow cross-national comparative studies. In addition, Madadli (2024) offers a thematic analysis of integrating ethical principles in FFP implementation, highlighting the importance of striking a balance between feminist ideals and the practicalities of foreign (and development) policy. In her exploratory research, Rathore (2024) emphasises the forgotten contributions of the non-Western world – especially women – to FFP discourses, advocating for a more inclusive approach in the study of IRs that integrates gender and ethics.

1.2.2 Across the globe: feminist approaches in foreign and development policies

In the next step, we critically examine the practical aspects of the effective translation of feminist agendas into actionable strategies and meaningful outcomes. The majority of available studies focus on Western states' feminist policies. As Sweden was the first country to adopt an FFP, the scholarship on feminist approaches to foreign policy has a strong empirical focus on Sweden (Aggestam & Bergman Rosamond, 2019; Aggestam & True, 2020, 2024; Aggestam et al., 2024, 2018; George, 2022; Nylund et al., 2023; Sundström et al., 2021; Towns et al., 2024). Others explore FFP in Canada (Robinson, 2024), France (Eroukhmanoff, 2024) or provide a comparison between Canada, France, Spain and Mexico (Thomson, 2024). The wide recognition of Sweden as a trendsetter and the approaches to understanding FFP through the angle of Western policies have been criticised for ignoring non-Western frameworks and historical contributions, especially those arising from post-colonial contexts (Rathore, 2024). Certain scholars highlight though that, even without calling a foreign policy explicitly feminist, other countries, for example in South Asia, have implemented feminist-informed measures in their policies before, for example in India (Parashar & D'Costa, 2017). All these contributions take a rather national perspectives, as they referring to the official documents prepared by the governments themselves. What is missing is a focus on how/if local perspectives across and beyond national borders feed into these understandings of feminism(s).

FFP has been described as "something without clear form, which is continually unfolding across different contexts" (Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023, p. 4). Parashar and D'Costa (2017) combine this observation with a critique of the coloniality that is carried and reproduced by FFP approaches (see also Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023; Uspenskaya & Kozlova, 2022). These authors highlight the differences in the uses of the terms "feminist" and "feminisms" in other state's approaches, and they highlight that countries in South Asia, like India, have implemented feminist-informed measures in their policies without calling their foreign policies explicitly feminist. They also identify blind spots in the discourses that shaped FFP from feminist perspectives – from peace activists across the globe and from anti-colonial thinkers in the Global South (Uspenskaya & Kozlova, 2022, p. 5; see also Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023). In addition, Parashar and D'Costa (2017, p. 28) point out that feminist struggles in the Global South challenge both the local patriarchies and the epistemic violence of the Global North. In this criticism, they link feminist discourses with (post-)colonial discourses, which is an understudied area (Uspenskaya & Kozlova, 2022, p. 5). As a theoretical contribution, Kirby elaborates on feminism and realism, while Thomson and Färber focus on FFP and power asymmetries between the so-called Global South and Global North (Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023). Here, the feminist policies are challenged for exactly what they are claiming to do differently: From a more local perspective, a feminist development or foreign approach can be seen as a concept that might not be applicable to different contexts in partner countries.

When feminist foreign and development approaches ignore non-Western perspectives and fail to adapt to local realities, they contradict their intent to promote gender equality, address power asymmetries and risk of being perceived as paternalistic or (neo-)colonial. It is a revealing tension between domestic and foreign priorities, both within the donor–recipient relationship and within the country itself. Aggestam and True (2024) analyse the gendered dynamics in foreign policies against the backdrop of contrary trends in contemporary global politics, with countries implementing feminist approaches in their foreign policies on the one hand, and misogyny governments on the other hand. For instance, Thomson's section (2024) investigates the concept and implications of FFP while also reflecting on the risk of a superficial adoption of the agenda without any significant changes. Eroukhmanoff (2024) critically analyses French feminist diplomacy, emphasising the contradictions between France's self-portrayal as a leader in gender equality and the complex, often troubled realities of its domestic gender politics. Tamang (2024) also critically examines India's FFP, highlighting how its outward commitment to progressive feminism and gender equality serves to conceal internal realities of racism,

violence and militarisation. Bergman Rosamond (2024) deals with the tension between the achievements of Sweden's FFP on a global scale and its limited influence on Sweden's own society.

Box 1: Feminist approaches in Germany's foreign and development policies

As part of the coalition treaty between the Social Democratic Party, the Green Party and the Liberal Party,[2] the German government announced in 2021 that their foreign, development and defence policies will follow a feminist approach.[3] In their official policy documents and communications, both the German Federal Minister for Development Cooperation, Svenja Schulze, and the German Federal Minister for Foreign Affairs, Annalena Baerbock, stress the necessity to link the focus on marginalised genders to more general attempts to decolonise foreign and development policies. They propose a human-centred and rights-based approach that takes into account intersectionality, meaning the intersections of different dimensions of social and gender identities and their (reinforcing) patterns of discrimination and marginalisation. Against this backdrop, the ministries seek to link their feminist approach to broader academic and practitioners' debates on post-colonialities, decoloniality and (gendered) power asymmetries in development cooperation and foreign affairs. However, in a 2024 opinion monitor, Bruder, Gödderz, Schneider and Zille (2024, pp. 67-90) present how feminist development policy is seen and understood in German society. Feminist development policy as a concept is more commonly known in German society (in 2024, 52 per cent of the respondents, from which 27 per cent said they know what it is about). The number of those who support this agenda has decreased from 59 per cent to 52 per cent from 2023 to 2024. In contrast, more respondents support a human-rights-based approach or a peace-building approach. Labelling the policy "feminist" further leads to stronger differences between supporters of different parties (polarising impact). Moreover, there is more support if instrumental (gender equality as a means to achieve other goals) and normative arguments (gender equality as a human right) are combined (see also Schneider, Gödderz, Zille, & Sassenhagen, 2024). The detachment of global feminist agendas and policies from the local contexts highlights the necessity for a nuanced, intersectional and context-specific understanding of local feminist perspectives for gender-transformative change.

The existing literature largely focuses on the conceptualisation and institutionalisation of feminist development and foreign policies, with comparatively limited attention given to the analysis of these policies from the local/national contexts in the partner countries. Scholars analyse feminist policies from implementing countries' perspective, while devoting little attention to the perspectives of recipient countries that are directly affected by their development and foreign policies. The discussion therefore excludes local feminist perspectives from partner countries and their considerations as transformation levers for greater gender equality.

2 The Liberal Party left the coalition on 7 November 2024. According to the German Federal Ministry of Justice (2024), the election to the 21st German Bundestag (Parliament) shall be held on 23 February 2025. At the time of writing this synthesis study, it is not clear if a new government will continue with a feminist approach for the foreign and development policy portfolio.

3 Germany joined the International Alliance for Feminist Movement in September 2024 (BMZ, 2024b).

Table 1: Definition of concepts

Concept	Definition
Local feminist perspectives	Feminisms stand for "critical perspectives on social and political life" (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 1) through the lens of gender, race, coloniality, (dis)ability, age and/or social/economic class. The variety of different feminisms across the world build a mosaic of diverse perspectives.
Transformation lever	The idea of transformation entails a drastic change from a status quo to a (radical) new status, often in the field of societal, ecological and/or economic transformations (Schneidewind, 2018). The concept of "levers" refers to the notion of an accelerating effect of a certain measure, initiative or perspective that could influence other actors or areas.
Intersectionality	The concept describes how different elements of identity intersect and result in specific experiences of oppression and privilege for different groups (Crenshaw, 1989).
Gender equality	"Gender equality means that the rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are male or female [or non-binary], handicapped or able bodied, young or elderly, white or black, or from rural or urban settings" (United Nations Population Fund, 2023).
Gender norms	Gender norms are a subset of social norms. They describe acceptable and unacceptable gendered expectations, behaviours and practices (Marcus & Somji, 2024).
Patriarchy	A system of gendered power relations that favours males or individuals identified as males by others (Marcus & Somji, 2024, p. 15).

Epistemic injustices can only be resolved by an active promotion of justice, acknowledgement of the value of marginalised people's testimonies and the strive for more inclusive knowledge systems (Cummings, Dhewa, Kemboi, & Young, 2023). For this purpose, the synthesis study also takes into account feminist calls for a reflection upon inherent power asymmetries in knowledge construction and approached the partner organisations with no conceptualisations about local feminist perspectives, transformation levers or gender equality. In light of this debate, the next sub-section presents the local contexts of Ghana, India and Ukraine – the partner countries for this synthesis study – their conceptualisations of various terms relevant to this study, as well as the attempts to understand how feminist discourses vary across different settings and require policies that are specifically tailored to these unique contexts.

1.2.3 Glimpses from partner countries' discourses on feminisms

To contextualise these strands of literature with the contexts of the partner countries, we want to briefly relate to the rich feminist literature focusing on women's roles, rights, and representation, particularly exploring how cultural, political and social structures impact women' rights and experiences in Ghana, India and Ukraine. This is not meant to duplicate the work done in the studies conducted by the partner organisations, but rather to situate the case studies prepared by the partner organisations in the different scholarships. Therefore, we can only present glimpses from the partner countries' discourses on feminisms in the remainder of this section.

The rich Ghanaian feminist literature covers a wide array of topics, ranging from gender representation (Ako-Nai & Obamamoye, 2018), cultural and structural challenges for gender equality (Odame, 2014), and barriers to political participation (Boakye, 2009; Odame, 2010), rape myths, attitudes (Boakye, 2009; Fakunmoju et al., 2021), women's empowerment and leadership (Tripp, 2023). Broader themes covered are the women's movement for gender quotas in Nigeria and Ghana (2000-2016), women in politics (in reference to the women's empowerment framework), traditional women leaders, Abantu for Development (in the Women's

Manifesto for Ghana) and the relevance of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 for women's rights in Ghana.[4] These research papers highlight the importance of addressing cultural, structural and systemic barriers to women's rights and representation in Ghana, and they advocate for targeted policies and reforms to empower women and promote gender equality in all spheres of life.

The literature on Indian feminisms is equally complex and diverse, covering intersectionality (Kaymaz Mert & Ünsal, 2022; Nanditha, 2021), the role of cultural narratives for feminist movements (Mount, 2020; Narayan, 1998, 2019) and their historical development (Bharti & Goyal, 2021), the link between feminisms and the digital space (Jain, 2020; Nanditha, 2021), critiques of Western feminism (e.g. Narayan, 1998, 2019) and neoliberal influences (Gupta, 2016). All in all, these studies cover two broad areas relating to representation and voice as well as empowerment and agency in Indian feminist research. By looking at the cases of Ghana and India, relevant topics dealt with by feminist researchers are gender-based violence and societal attitudes, feminist activism and digital platforms, the cultural context and feminist theory, political representation and gender quotas, intersectionality and inclusivity, Global South perspectives, and empowerment through education and literature. The emphasis on intersectionality and inclusivity further underscores the complexity of women's issues in both Ghana and India, highlighting the necessity for tailored approaches in feminist activism and policy-making.

The scholarship on Ukrainian feminisms covers four broad themes. One theme refers to Ukraine's position "between the West and the East, the North and South" and addresses its being a post-socialist society. Hrytsenko (2022) situates Ukrainian feminism between the West and Russia, Channell-Justice (2020) explores feminist research and activism in post-socialist societies, and Santoire (2023) concentrates on the WPS agenda and its missing focus on post-Soviet spaces. Santoire identifies a metageography and in-betweenness of post-Soviet regions as neither Global North nor Global South, describing it as a "Second World" while referring to the rearrangement from East/West geopolitical imaginaries to South/North after the end of the Cold War. The second broad theme covered by Ukrainian feminist scholarship describes the relationship between women, military and war. Here, Martsenyuk and Grytsenko (2017) elaborate on women and the military in Ukraine, Oliker (2022) investigates gender dynamics shaping the war and O'Sullivan (2019, 2022) concentrates on the WPS agenda in Ukraine. O'Sullivan (2019) describes the Ukrainian National Action Plan as following a too narrow militarised form of the WPS agenda due to the ongoing conflict, nationalistic feminism and the influence of international organisations. Her work from 2020 connects WPS scholarship with feminist security studies and feminist political economy and demonstrates that post-war neoliberal economy and gender-responsive peace-building in Ukraine clash with each other. A third theme focuses on women and nation-building, with Zhurzhenko (2001) elaborating on the role of women in nation- and state-building, and Hrycak and Rewakowicz (2009) highlighting the role of East European intellectuals in building foundations for democratic institutions through the establishment of Ukrainian feminist micro-publics. Transnationalist feminisms and (gendered) regional dynamics form a fourth theme within Ukrainian feminist scholarship, with Sharova (2022) exploring the gender dimension in political processes in post-communist states in Eastern Europe and Hrycak (2007) exploring the link between transnationalism and feminist movements in Ukraine.

The common thread across Ghanaian, Indian and Ukrainian feminist studies is the exploration of the ways in which cultural, political and social structures impact women's rights and experiences. They collectively advocate for a more nuanced understanding of feminism(s) that considers local contexts and the need for systemic changes to address gender-based violence

4 The Beijing Conference was "pivotal for formulating ideas and goals for gender and development, culminating with the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action – arguably the most progressive blueprint ever to advance women's rights" (Towns et al., 2024, p. 1268).

and enhance women's political representation. At the same time, there is a significant lack of scholarship examining how these elements interconnect and intersect to address both global and context-specific development challenges towards greater gender equality. Following a multi-directional understanding of norm flows and travels (Zwingel, 2012), this study explores how norms at various levels and scale influence each other and how they can be changed to support developments towards gender-transformative change. In order to provide a more comprehensive analysis of these concepts and their role as transformation levers, the next sub-section outlines the methodological considerations of this study that seek to ensure a deeper understanding and reflection on the case studies prepared by the partner organisations.

1.3 Methodological considerations: how to synthesise the case studies prepared by the partner organisations

The literature on feminist development and foreign policies provided a foundational understanding of the latest global feminist discourses and frameworks, and it pointed to the need to develop strategies for driving gender-transformative change in localised and context-sensitive feminist agendas. In total, three partner organisations in Ghana, India and Ukraine, which were selected based on a carefully defined set of criteria, contributed to this study with their expertise, knowledge and experiences of national contexts. The methodological framework in this synthesis study was created with the intent of enabling a research process that captures global and local feminist perspectives, while prioritising a feminist research ethic, ensuring participatory action research approaches, and integrating theoretical foundations for a synthesis.

1.3.1 Case selection and presentation of cases

The case selection was based on a set of criteria that helped in identifying three countries of particular relevance to our research questions and the overall research objectives of the project. These criteria included the state of gender (in)equality in the country, the country's socio-economic situation/development status and its socio-political/fragility status, as well as its civil society landscape. Furthermore, we wanted to include countries that differed in population sizes, political systems (e.g. presidential, parliamentary, semi-presidential; decolonised states, post-socialist societies) and geographical locations to cover a variety of societies and political systems in our sample.

Ghana has been an independent state since 1957, and with that it became the first independent state in sub-Saharan Africa. Ghana is a unitary presidential constitutional democracy with a multi-party system. Ghanaians had an influential role in decolonisation and Pan-African movements. Before its independence, Ghana was under Portuguese and British colonial administration, and it is a founding member of the Non-Alignment Movement and the African Union. It is also a member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). It has around 31 million inhabitants. With a view towards questions concerning gender equality, in Ghana there are matrilineal and patrilineal societies,[5] offering an interesting lens to analyse gender norms as well as barriers to transformative change.

India has been an independent state since 1947 and a federal republic since 1950. It is constituted as a democratic parliamentary structure with a multi-party system. India is also part of the Non-Aligned Movement and supported decolonisation processes in Africa and Asia. India

5 In Ghana, individuals identify their lineage through either matrilineal or patrilineal ties, that is, through the female or male bloodline, forming the basis of their familial affiliations (Kutsoati & Morck, 2016). In Indian matrilineal societies, even the authority and power of men is inherited from women (Goswami, 2024).

is the most populous country of the world, with around 1.4 billion inhabitants. Although certain scholars identified feminist ideals in Indian politics (Parashar, 2016), in terms of gender (in)equality, India is "among the countries that are considered as least gender sensitised" (Malik, 2021, p. 290). Similar to Ghana, in India there are matrilineal and patrilineal societies as well as differences between traditional societies and urban areas – in terms of gender (in)equality – that can inform studies on gender norms.

Ukraine became an independent state in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It is a semi-presidential republic and a unitary state. Ukraine has approximately 33 million inhabitants. Russia started its war against Ukraine in 2014 with the illegal annexation of Crimea and a destablisation processes in eastern Ukraine. In February 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which has also had an influence on societal roles, for example gendered citizenships, and the work of feminist movements. According to a report by UN Women (2022), "Rapid Gender Analysis of Ukraine", the issues of social development and gender equality are being neglected because of the current war, despite the fact that the situation has exacerbated gender inequality, discrimination and disproportionate levels of violence against women and girls. Zychowicz (2020, p. 5) described this issue in Ukraine as the "common sidelining of women's needs and experiences evident throughout periods of uncertainty". Within nationalist contexts, the feminist themes in Ukrainian literature can be traced back to 1890, when women writers and journalists in the pre-Soviet era formed organisations to resolve women's issues and advocate for gender equality (Martsenyuk, 2023). Their writings have spawned modern female voices and movements such as Femen, which have modified Western ideas of feminism to address local social and political issues through revolutionary and rebellious actions.

1.3.2 A feminist research ethic, reflexivity and positionality

The methodological considerations of this study are based on a feminist research ethic, which can be framed as a

> methodological commitment to any set of research practices that reflect on power of epistemology, boundaries, relationships, and the multiple dimensions of the researcher's location throughout the research process and to a normative commitment to transforming the social order in order to promote gender justice. (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 2)

Relations between and within societies, particularly those between the so-called Global South and Global North, are shaped by power asymmetries with people(s) belonging to more powerful socio-economic, majority groups and others belonging to groups with less-accepted socio-economic status (Foucault, 1977; Ziai, 2015). A feminist research ethic "helps us to reflect on and attend to dynamics of power, knowledge, relationships, and context throughout the research process" (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 2) through a gendered lens. A feminist research ethic refers to the epistemological dimension of research (theory of knowledge), the methodology (theory and analysis of research) as well as the methods (techniques for gathering evidence) (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 9). A feminist research ethic calls for critical reflection as a work ethic and an understanding of the "provisionality and contingency of data and the construction of knowledge through categorization and boundaries" (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 2). Such categories and boundaries also need, in turn, to be reflected upon and related in "non-essentialist and trans-formative ways" (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 2). This methodological commitment also sets the objectives of the research conducted as serving overarching "feminist goals of social justice" (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 7). To this end, research questions need to be of relevance for those who are participating in or being affected by the research (Ackerly & True, 2020, p. 258; Gervais, Weber, & Caron, 2020, part 2, p. 15). The principles of a feminist ethic guide this synthesis and its approach to critically reflect on the knowledge and experiences shared by the partners in

their studies, address the question of power dynamics, and navigate the boundaries and categorisation of our cross-cultural research.

By referring to the feminist call for reflections upon categories and boundaries used and applied in the process of knowledge construction, we want to introduce another dimension of feminist research around questions of reflexivity and positionality. Reflexivity "can serve as a tool to dismantle embedded power hierarchies" (Bilgen, Nasir, & Schöneberg, 2022, p. 2) in the research process. Being reflexive supports identifying "dominant forms of knowledge production" (Bilgen et al., 2022, p. 2) while not problematising subjectivity but embracing it. Positionalities, (intersecting) identities of race, class, gender, sex, ethnicity, citizenship(s), (dis)ability and age shape our analyses that "are inevitably subjective" (Bilgen et al., 2022, p. 3). With such a "subjective lens" (Bilgen et al., 2022, p. 3), we highlight that our contribution can be only one among many – what Bilgen et al. (2022) call "pluriversal dialogues" (p. 3). These pluriversal dialogues are, in turn, needed to question and contest notions of neutrality and objectivity of knowledge production in science. Hence, reflexivity and positionality are interlinked, with reflexivity being the process of becoming aware of one's positionalities firstly, and of the roles that one's positionalities play in the research process and how they shape the research results secondly. In this way, being reflexive about positionalities means also to better understand how research processes construct and reinforce hierarchical power relations (Bilgen et al., 2022, p. 5). Accordingly, Bilgen et al. (2022) describe positionality as the "in-betweenness" of the researchers' identities and the research process/ the knowledge construction. Furthermore, this in-betweenness points to the character and circumstances of issues that development studies deal with, for instance questions of poverty and inequality (Bilgen et al., 2022, p. 5).

Building on the idea of "pluriversal dialogues", we frame local feminist perspectives as informing alternative approaches to development by challenging "development as a powerful discourse" (Bilgen et al., 2022, pp. 3-5). To reflect on our own positionalities, we all share different characteristics and linked types of privileges that inform responsibilities along the phases of the research process (Degai et al., 2022). We all are part of established discourses and power asymmetries. Working with colleagues from partner organisations was a deliberate choice, as we do not want to interpret "local" feminist perspectives from other parts of the world, but want to deconstruct inherent discursive hierarchies. For the commissioned studies implemented by the partner organisations, we have set a broad framework but have always communicated that we are interested in their perspectives and stories. We are conscious that the term "feminism" does not serve as a door opener in all contexts, and that the do-no-harm approach shall lead our work. Nevertheless, we are aware of the asymmetric relationship between our colleagues in the partner countries and our team. The colleagues at our partner organisations themselves then stand in relationships with their research participants, which describes their additional role as bridge builders. In the exchange with us, the colleagues at the partner organisations represent "local" perspectives, but together with their research participants, they fulfil another role on another scale. This circumstance is informed by fluid identities describing different positionalities in different spaces, situations and contexts.

1.3.3 Participatory action research

Accordingly, for the topic of this study – local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality – we introduce as methodological considerations participatory action research as part of our operationalisation (Reid, Tom, & Frisby, 2006), which is needed to address existing power asymmetries and for the alignment with a feminist research ethic. Participatory action research is intended to act towards social justice by being directed towards root causes of (gendered) inequalities. By applying this framework for the study, we stress the relevance and role of the work of our partner organisations and their research participants. With this project, we have set the broad framework for the research, but we gave the partners full ownership about how this research is implemented and designed in detail. Through different

types of workshops – either online or in person, organised as kick-off workshops at the beginning of the project, as interim workshops in the partner countries and in Germany as well as a joint in-person workshop – we sought to provide space for exchange and mutual learning, among and between the partner organisations and with our team. The in-person workshop – with all partner organisations and us coming together – further allowed us to discuss our ideas for the synthesis study and how we aim to contextualise the results from the case studies prepared by the partner organisations against the backdrop of research on feminist development and foreign approaches. Moreover, our partner organisations applied participatory approaches in their studies by acknowledging the contributions of the research participants to their research.

1.3.4 Methodological approaches used by the case studies prepared by the partner organisations

We have compiled the methodological approaches used by the partner organisations in Table 2 to show their diversity as well as commonalities.[6] Both the Ghanaian and Indian studies have followed a qualitative approach for their data collection and analysis, while the Ukrainian study has applied a mixed-methods approach by combining qualitative and quantitative elements. All the partners conducted comprehensive reviews of the available literature on legislation, policies and activism within their respective countries. Similarly, all of them engaged with activists, experts and representatives of local organisations, both individually and in groups, to gather data for their studies. In addition, the Ukrainian study was unique for incorporating a survey that reached people from all regions, including occupied territories, as well as members of the diaspora, some of whom were forcibly displaced abroad or left due to the war. The current conflict restricted Ukrainian partners to online approaches, unlike Ghana and India, where interviews and group activities were held both virtually and in-person.

6 We have summarised and compiled the overview of methodological approaches used by the case studies prepared by the partner organisations, adhering to the same terminologies as the case studies to maintain clarity and consistency.

Table 2: Overview of methodological approaches used by the partners

	Ghana	India	Ukraine
Overview	Cross-sectional study that used qualitative approach for data collection	Qualitative study drawing on both primary and secondary data sources	Mixed-method study design that combines quantitative and qualitative methods
Literature review	**Desk review** of information on activism, laws and policies from the last two decades	**Literature review** of policy documents, legislation, data and other interventions	**Desk study** of legislations, socio-cultural practices, and feminist initiatives, in the context of war
Survey			**Web survey** was filled out by 720 participants from all regions of Ukraine (including occupied territories, Crimea and diaspora)
Interviews	**Individual interviews** with 35 local representatives were held in-person and virtually	**Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)** include 12 interviews with experts and 18 with local organisations	**In-depth interviews** with 20 feminist researchers and activists were conducted online
Validation	**Validation workshop** was carried out in hybrid format in Accra for 30 participants	**Stakeholder dialogue** was conducted in New Delhi, in three segments among 40 participants	**Focus group discussions** held online with 25 people in 5 groups (4 groups of women and 1 of men)
Data analysis	Data collected from these semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analysed using both deductive and inductive **coding methods**	The data from the literature review and KIIs were analysed using **thematic analysis**	Data from surveys using SPSS, along with interviews and group discussions, were analysed inductively with open coding and the Voyant tool, followed by **data triangulation**

Source: Authors; case studies prepared by the partner organisations

1.3.5 Rationale and approach of the synthesis study

Building on these methodological considerations, the key method for this study is a synthesis study as part of the case study research. The specific method applied for this synthesis study forms part of the qualitative case study research (Gerring, 2007; Mahoney & Goertz, 2012). The synthesis study aims at contributing to theory-building by identifying patterns across primary studies (Hoon, 2013, p. 526). In the field of feminist research, this synthesis study contributes to a better understanding of local feminist perspectives by providing evidence for their potential to act as transformation levers for greater gender equality. To build theory, the synthesis study seeks to extract, analyse and synthesise the qualitative evidence derived from the primary studies (Hoon, 2013, p. 523). There are three different perspectives on how to synthesise: 1) aggregation (following the research paradigm of positivism), 2) interpretation (following postpositivism) and 3) translation (following social constructivism) (Hoon, 2013, p. 525). By applying the interpretative perspective in this synthesis study, the integrity of the primary studies shall be maintained while building on their insights for conducting the synthesis (Hoon, 2013, p. 526). Hence, contextualisation plays a crucial role and needs to be considered for formulating

theoretical contributions (Hoon, 2013, p. 526). The objective of the synthesis is to go beyond the contributions made by the primary studies while applying an exploratory and inductive research design (Hoon, 2013, p. 527). To this end, Hoon (2013, p. 529) proposes an eight-step process to conduct a synthesis study, which shall be applied for this synthesis as well: 1) framing of the research question(s), 2) locating relevant research, 3) defining inclusion criteria, 4) extracting and coding data, 5) analysing on a case-specific level, 6) synthesizing on an across-study level, 7) building theory from meta-synthesis and 8) discussing. Having said this, we do not want to imply that the studies of the partner organisations need synthesising to be of relevance, but rather that with the synthesis study, we are aiming for a different target group than the partners, that group being German, European and international audiences. We understand the contribution of this synthesis study as complementing the picture already painted by the studies prepared by the partners by illustrating further evidence on common themes and diversities in the field of gender norms and practices.

2 Synthesis: discussion and reflections on case studies prepared by the partner organisations

The synthesis study analysed three case studies from Ghana, India and Ukraine, and it found common patterns that go beyond the specific national/local contexts, offering insights into the sociological, political and structural dynamics that have broader applicability and relevance. From their insights, we deduced 13 criteria, which can be grouped into five clusters, those being intersectionality, special characteristics of local feminisms and gender (in)equalities, multi-directional flow of norms, challenges and opportunities for gender-transformative change, and future of gender-transformative policies (see Figure 1). We combined deductive (from theory) and inductive (from the material) processes for developing the clustered criteria for the synthesis. Among these five, intersectionality has a special role and is located on another hierarchical level than the other criteria. **“Intersectionality”** is both a cluster and a criterion. We combined deductive (from theory) and inductive (from the material) processes for developing the clustered criteria for the synthesis. The second cluster, **“special characteristics of local feminisms and gender (in)equalities”** brings together different criteria on a descriptive and analytical level, including the specific sectoral focus applied and the insights gathered by the studies; context-specific factors and implicit/explicit local translations/understandings of feminism(s); characteristics of gender (in)equalities with gender orders; structural factors; and the difference between discursive level/ action level. We developed the third cluster, **“multi-directional flow of norms”,** deductively, as it entails input to/ interfaces with other (academic) debates; points of reference from global, regional and local discourses (norms, diversities of cultures); the impact on (global) discourses on feminism(s); as well as donor-driven/ external influences/incentives through the lens of norm (change). Under the cluster **“challenges and opportunities for gender-transformative change”** (deductive and inductive), we have grouped the criteria of the means of implementation, windows of opportunity/ entry points for transformation and limitations. This cluster examines the challenges and opportunities within the current state of gender-transformative change, paving the way for the last cluster, which focuses on future directions and recommendations for gender-transformative policies. The fifth cluster, **“future of gender-transformative policies”**, (inductive and deductive) brings together the criteria of trends, changes over time, direction of travel, conclusions, (policy) recommendations, topics, and questions for future research.

Box 2: Abstracts from the case studies prepared by the partner organisations[7]

Abstract from the Ghanaian case study

Ghana is a multi-party, multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, with a dominant influence of socio-cultural norms and practices that impact negatively on women in their everyday lives. Most Ghanaians are subject to customary law which discriminates against women, even though Ghana practises legal pluralism. The overall aim of the study is to explore and analyse contemporary feminist perspectives and organising in Ghana to demonstrate how they can be used as levers for transformative change for greater equality and sustainable development.

This was a cross-sectional and fully qualitative study involving 35 feminists and women's rights advocates between the ages of 37 and 80+ years, with the majority (n=25) having over 20 years of experience and relevant postgraduate degrees. Data collection, analysis and conceptualisation were guided by the gender-transformative approach and the gender at work frameworks.

Our findings show that gender inequity occurs in both formal and informal spaces. Strongly held socio-cultural norms emanating from patriarchy influence women's daily lives, and the decisions made within sub-national and national legislature. Feminist strategies span general awareness creation, through lobbying, writing and reviewing of content for policies and laws, increasing the visibility of bills to picketing to ensure the passage and implementation of applicable laws or policies. Participants consider their strategies successful despite challenges such as backlash, burnout, and the lack of funding for their activities.

The legal pluralism practised in Ghana, coupled with its highly patriarchal history, require the presence and effectiveness of a non-state "conscience" on gender to drive gender-transformative changes towards sustainable development. In the future, core funding support for feminists will be crucial in the quest for more gender equality in Ghana.

Abstract from the Indian case study

This study explores the transformative potential of local feminist perspectives in addressing systemic gender inequalities in India, focusing on women's health and climate action. Anchored in global frameworks, such as the Beijing Declaration (1995) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and rooted in India's historical milestones, such as the *Towards Equality Report* in 1974 (Government of India, 1974), this research examines how caste, class, gender, sexuality and disability intersect to perpetuate inequities. Despite progress in education, health, and political representation, deep-seated patriarchal norms and structural barriers continue to undermine women's agency, as reflected in India's low ranking on the Global Gender Gap Report 2024 (World Economic Forum, 2024). Using intersectional and eco-feminist frameworks, the study employs a qualitative, multi-method approach, including 31 key informant interviews and a stakeholder dialogue involving 40 participants from non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community organisations and feminist collectives. By integrating lived experiences with policy analysis, this study highlights how local feminist movements in India have challenged entrenched social norms, amplified marginalised voices and innovated to provide context-specific solutions.

The findings reveal persistent health inequities among women, compounded by caste and disability, and critique health policies for their technocratic focus. Interventions by community organisations as well as governments, such as community health workers and self-help groups, have emerged as vital platforms for addressing reproductive and menstrual health needs while fostering social change. In climate action, women face disproportionate vulnerabilities due to caregiving roles and resource dependencies. However, localised initiatives, including women-led renewable energy programmes and sustainable agriculture practices, showcase their potential as agents of environmental resilience. The study advocates for recognising intersectional vulnerabilities, converging across sectors, improving participatory governance, strengthening capacity building of community organisations, and including divergent experiences of women in policy and intersectional funding models. By situating feminist knowledge within actionable frameworks, it presents a replicable model for integrating gender justice into health and climate strategies, offering lessons for global contexts. The report underscores the necessity of sustained collaboration among community actors, women's advocacy groups, policymakers and donors to foster systemic equity and resilience.

Abstract from the Ukrainian case study

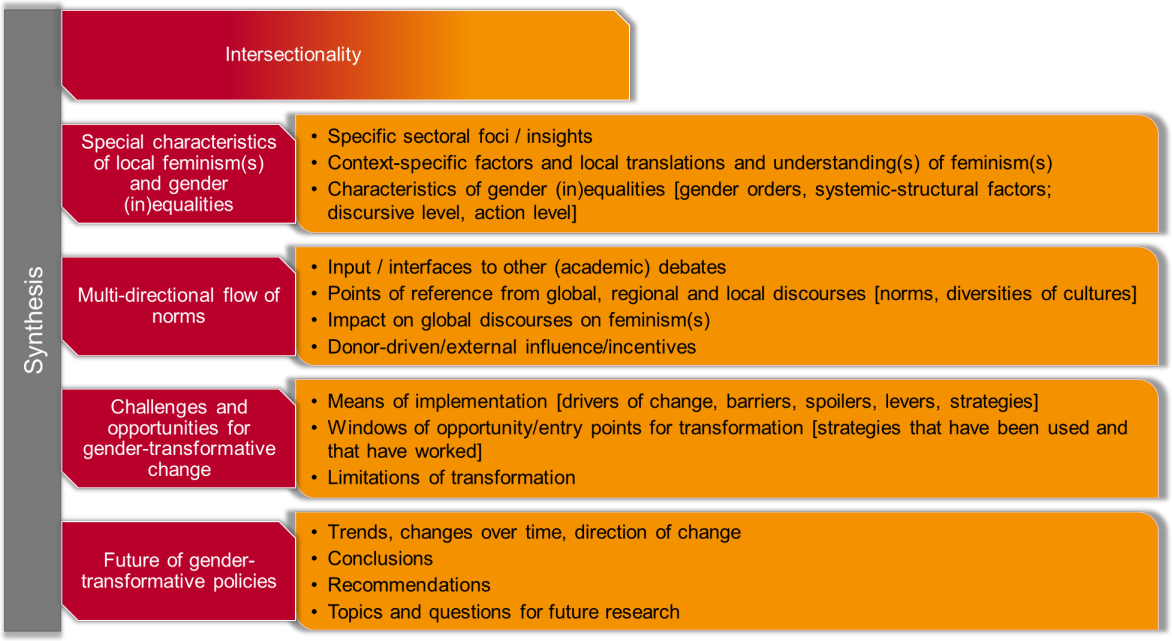
The research in this discussion paper explores the significant role of feminist perspectives and actions in fostering sustainable gender-transformative changes within Ukraine, particularly during the ongoing defence against Russian aggression. It highlights the ability of feminist movements to catalyse long-term shifts towards gender equality and social inclusion, with a focus on women's and LGBT+ rights. Despite the challenges of war, feminist activists continue to push for transformative policies that not only address immediate wartime needs, but also lay the foundation for gender-responsive defence, inclusive recovery and post-war reconstruction. This study examines the impact of feminist actions and perspectives on various sectors of Ukrainian society, the barriers they face and the opportunities that remain for strengthening feminist policies during and after the war. The research timeline spans 2014-2024, corresponding to the duration of Russia's war against Ukraine, with a particular emphasis on the period of the full-scale invasion from 2022 to 2024.

2.1 Clusters

While in Figure 1 we bundle the insights from the case studies prepared by the partner organisations on local feminist perspectives along the different clustered criteria, these clusters also structure the following section. In each sub-section (intersectionality, special characteristics of local feminisms and gender (in)equalities, multi-directional flow of norms, challenges and opportunities for gender-transformative change, and future of gender-transformative policies), we reflect on a conceptual level on the insights and results from the case studies prepared by the partner organisations against the backdrop of feminist development and foreign policy approaches. To this end, we address the research questions driving the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and, accordingly, also this synthesis study on the role of norms and practices for gender-transformative policies (RQ 1), local feminist perspectives (RQ 2) and how these can offer alternative approaches to development processes (RQ 3) as well as increase access to resources, rights and representation (RQ 4).

7 We have directly quoted the abstracts from the case studies prepared by the partner organisations, maintaining their original concepts and terminology to ensure consistency.

Figure 1: Matrix of clustered criteria for synthesis



Source: Authors

2.1.1 Intersectionality

By starting with the first criteria and cluster of intersectionality, we see a high relevance in all three case studies prepared by the partner organisations to explain intersecting forms of discrimination and barriers to gender-transformative approaches. In the case studies prepared by the partner organisations, intersectionality serves the objectives of local feminisms and intersectional approaches towards human rights that can better address intersecting forms of discrimination and marginalisation. From (local) feminist perspectives, gender is only one dimension, informing feminist calls for system approaches to tackle norms. All three case studies prepared by the partner organisations criticise the non-availability/non-accessibility of segregated data on different categories of gender and social identities, which is needed to design more intersectional approaches towards gender equality and equity. In many contexts, gender is still understood in a binary logic.

Thinking in binaries cannot address all intersectional forms of inequity because it excludes other sexual and gender identities. The study on Ghana stresses that feminism does not stand alone but shows strong links to the women's rights space. The Indian study refers to Dalit feminism and Queer feminism in India and how these movements have contested binary logics through their inherent intersectional approach. Accordingly, the study on local feminist perspectives in India concludes by introducing intersectionality as a lever for change towards more gender equality and equity. The Ukrainian study highlights the role of LGBTQIA* persons in the military as an intersectional lens in their focus on the ongoing defence in Ukraine with a potential to change gender norms. As such, the three studies show intersectional analyses of local feminist perspectives in quite different contexts and apply them for diverse thematic foci.

2.1.2 Special characteristics of local feminisms and gender (in)equalities

The second cluster showcases the different sectoral foci and thematic insights from the studies. While the Ghanaian study focuses on gender-transformative policies and factors of success, with particular attention to gender-based violence and female representation in politics, the Indian colleagues introduce women's health and climate action as focus areas. The Ukrainian

study analyses feminist perspectives during ongoing defence and post-war recovery. These different foci stand for a thematic richness and diversity of areas in which feminist perspectives are relevant and influential.

Furthermore, this cluster brings together questions from the case studies prepared by the partner organisations, particularly for the terms “feminist”/“feminism” regarding acceptance, local translations and understandings of these labels in different contexts, and how these contribute to positive change. In all three contexts, we can identify trade-offs and inconsistencies that raise questions on the legitimacy of foreign and development policies following a feminist approach against the backdrop of paternalistic and neo-colonial arguments. Post-development approaches also criticise foreign and development policies for reinforcing Western dominance by imposing a knowledge system that is viewed as modern and developed, while other knowledge and cultures are seen as deficient and in need of correction (Schöneberg & Ziai, 2021, as cited in Köllner, 2023). As a polarising term, feminism/feminist can bring both exclusion and inclusion, which implies certain trade-offs. Local translations of feminist ideals are, for instance in the Ghanaian context, the role of queen mothers for the decision of naming a new chief, the role of market women in Ghanaian societies and economy, or the figure of *Yaa Asantewaa* as a female fighter who stood up against the colonisers.[8] To this end, pre-colonial African feminist ideals are highlighted and can counteract notions of feminism being a foreign concept. Given its grassroots’ approach, the Indian study provides several examples for local understandings of feminism(s) with self-help groups, women-led development, the Indian sex workers’ movement, the HIV (human immunodeficiency virus) movement, the LGBTQIA* movement, the Chambal project and Solar Mamas. These understandings of feminisms contest elite discourses on feminism by adding perspectives from marginalised groups that show diverse aspects of femininity. The literal translation to Hindi comes with certain challenges though, with *Mahilavadi* and *Narivadi* meaning anti-men and women-centric. Furthermore, the Indian study points to the differences between pre- and post-colonial feminist discourses and the appreciation of a uniqueness of Indian feminisms, with own dictionaries of gender being developed. For the Ukrainian study, the war very much sets the context. In Ukrainian societies, a feminist agenda had been developed before Russia’s full-scale invasion in 2022. Different to other contexts, local feminist perspectives from Ukraine stress that the militarisation and generally highly valued role of men during wartime have not led to a complete renaissance of patriarchy. Nevertheless, the study shows gender gaps in all areas of life, those being employment, education, payment, political leadership, work–life balance and media representation, which are all further challenged through the situation of ongoing defence.

Additionally, in this cluster we deduced the difference between structural/ rights-based approaches on the one hand, and the individual’s role in society’s approaches on the other hand. Both approaches can have their power of change, but also their limitations. All case studies prepared by the partner organisations discuss the shortcomings of initiatives addressing the individual level only, also given that in certain contexts, the level of intervention should not be the individual but the household level, for example in the case of India. Furthermore, in this cluster we can identify common issues in the difference between a discursive and action level. The Ghanaian study, for instance, points to the different laws in place that shall secure gender equality, but also to their lack of rigorous implementation as well as applications of customary law. The Indian study addresses this criterion as well by differentiating between having rights and claiming rights (e.g. in the field of women’s land rights). In the Ukrainian study, the authors analyse the wide discrepancy between the discursive level with pledges for gender equality and the action level with actual policies and funding. The study further identifies the post-socialist context as setting certain limitations to broader societal and political discussions on gender

8 The last example is not dealt with by the study but was shared with us during our time in Accra by another informant.

equality, as it is seen as being part of socialist norms, although gender inequalities have existed under the propaganda as well.

Moreover, insights in this cluster also ask critically what is new about a feminist foreign agenda – both from academic as well as practitioners' perspectives. The "Women in Development" approach is rooted in liberal feminist and modernisation theories, while "Women and Development" draws on neo-Marxist and dependency theories, and "Gender and Development" is influenced by socialist feminist theory. Post-colonial feminism provides a critical lens on women in development discourses by questioning the underlying assumptions and power dynamics embedded in Western development narratives. It challenges the portrayal of women in the Global South as victims and the misrepresentation of their experiences, which often ignore their intersectional identities and the oppression they face (McEwan, 2001). In contrast, feminist research on development and foreign policy encompasses a wide variety of perspectives. This cluster identifies, on the one hand, colonialities in the knowledge production around feminist development and foreign approaches but also, on the other hand, examples for local feminist perspectives that challenge such colonialities and powerful discourses.

2.1.3 Multi-directional flow of norms

The studies contribute to, deliver input for and show interfaces with different academic debates, particularly for research that helps to deconstruct and better understand the dynamics of (gender) norms (Butler, 2024; León-Himmelstine, George, Tant, & Harper, 2022; Marcus & Somji, 2024; Roy, 2016; Zwingel, 2012). The Ghanaian study contributes to the scholarship on post-colonial societies, the influence of colonial rule on traditional systems of societies, African feminism(s) and body politics.[9] The Indian study, in contrast, shows relevant insights for Global Health discussions, care work, social work, identity politics, queer feminism, migration studies and subaltern studies.[10] For the Ukrainian study, scholarship on violence, care work and post-conflict societies are relevant points of reference. The three studies contribute to these strands of literature and discourses by adding concrete local, endemic insights into feminist struggles and providing evidence on persistent gender norms.

As part of this cluster, we can further explore the contributions made by the partner organisations to develop a better understanding of gender norms and their role for transformative change for gender equality – particularly in view of scalar analyses. Gender norms, as a subset of social norms, together with gender inequitable practices lead to gender gaps in different and intersecting areas of life. One line of argument we can see in all three case studies is about the phenomenon of gendered time poverty as part of discussions on gendered care work and unpaid work.

In this cluster, we can also deduce aspects of and on norm diffusion in the case studies prepared by the partner organisations. They suggest a multi-directional understanding of norm diffusion (Roy, 2016; Zwingel, 2012), which is informed by different flows and travels between different scales, from the local to the international/transnational. These multi-directional, multi-scalar flows of norms relate to discourses in the sense of theoretical movements, to global women's movements as well as to political declarations and international agendas. Applying international norms and designing them is hence to be understood as two parts of the same phenomenon. Taking local feminist perspectives as a lens in all three studies further shows the links and interrelations between the different levels of discourses and influences on feminisms. The

9 Body politics is "peoples' political struggle to claim control over their felt and lived biological, social and cultural embodied experiences" (Harcourt, 2022, p. 109) and "autonomy over their own bodies in order to be able to exercise their rights" (Harcourt, 2022, p. 111).

10 "Subaltern Studies exceeds the discipline of history, participating in contemporary critiques of history and nationalism, and of orientalism and euro-centrism in the construction of social-science knowledge" (Navarro Tejero, 2004, p. 86).

interaction between local and transnational feminisms is further complemented by so-called diaspora feminisms – the phenomenon of feminists living abroad and contributing to discourses in their home contexts (Campt & Thomas, 2008; Hua, 2012).

All three studies provide points of reference from global, regional and local discourses by pointing to norms and diversities of cultures as well as impacts from their specific contexts on global discourses on feminism(s). For the Ghanaian study, the diversity of cultures, religions, belief systems and societal organisation is stressed. Questions of gender (in)equalities – particularly the differences between matrilineal and patrilineal societies – are highlighted. The situation in the north of the country – with its majority of patrilineal societal organisations – is more challenging for women's rights and participation than in other parts of the country with their majority of matrilineal societies. Interestingly, in the Ghanaian context, feminist and gender equality discourses are not strongly linked to decolonial approaches, for instance in other decolonised contexts such as Namibia and Kenya. For the impact on global discourses on feminism, the Ghanaian context overall contributes to the field of African feminism(s).

Similarly, also India presents a quite diverse context with different religions and the caste system. Gender issues intersect with these other dimensions of identity and lead to different forms of discrimination and marginalisation. Against this backdrop, movements such as Dalit feminism developed specifically to tell different stories than those told by Hindu, upper-class movements. Also in the Indian context, the study elaborates on matrilineal and patrilineal societies, while the latter represent a majority. The Indian study additionally refers to tribal societies and their quite progressive social norms, which challenge stereotypical understandings of rural and urban areas and their communities. These societies are, however, still often framed as receivers of change – and accordingly as objects, victims and beneficiaries – instead of agents of change. In general, the Indian study indicates that Indian discourses on feminisms show strong linkages to transnational trends, for example in the areas of NGOisation (non-governmental organisation) and the deterritorialisation of feminisms (Roy, 2016). Moreover, the Indian study criticises that, in the field of women and environment, local movements can get hijacked by global discourses, for example through the feminisation of nature. The cultural dimension of nature is stressed and nature is presented as a woman by giving nature and land a female body. Indian discourses impact global debates on feminism(s), most prominently through sex workers' movements. Furthermore, India has influenced other contexts – questions of child marriage in Bangladesh and abortion in Ireland – by being an example of how to keep religion out of law-making and challenging modernity in the nation-state.

In the Ukrainian context, points of reference from global, regional and local discourses can be found in the area of post-socialist societies and their specific type of gender equality. This type can be described as supporting gender equality on a superficial level by referring to the socialist organisation of society, which also included women as active in the workforce, while gender inequalities continued to exist under propaganda (Strelnyk, Yuzva, & Zlobina, 2025). The study still identifies gendered norms and rules, with a particularly challenging situation being in the lands occupied under illegal Russian authoritarian rule. Other points of reference for the Ukrainian context are conflict-affected societies and militant feminism. In terms of the impacts of the Ukrainian case on global discourses on feminism(s), we can identify the question of societal changes in times of war and how Ukrainian societies are not confirming trends of stronger patriarchal norms.

For the criterion of donor-driven and external influence/incentives, the three cases show similar but also different insights. For the Ghanaian case, the influence of evangelical groups on the public discourse needs to be mentioned, as it culminated in the "Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values" bill. It was brought into parliament as a private bill by a few parliamentarians in 2021 and was anonymously passed by the parliament in 2024. Although the president is not signing the bill, the discourse has turned negative in terms of the rights of the LGBTQIA* community. The discourse has a direct influence on the field of development

cooperation and its aim to do-no-harm. With societal discourse problematising queer rights, external actors need to proceed with particular care when implementing projects geared towards more gender equality. In the Ukrainian case, gender equality is seen as a part of European integration. All three contexts point to NGOisation as an issue for women' rights and organisations that are active in this field. Since the budget is tied to projects that often favour behavioural and individual approaches over structural ones, feminist agendas can become instrumentalised by external donors and their agendas. The Indian case further indicates rather liberal feminist approaches pushed by external actors that cannot achieve changes on the structural level.

The notions of glocality and hyperlocality are also referred to in the case studies prepared by the partner organisations. The study conducted by the Indian partners, in particular, provides some relevant aspects in that regard, because they have reached out to actors and organisations at the grassroots level for their approach, and applied grassroots' perspectives to analyse local feminist perspectives. The idea of glocal connections is quite strongly expressed in their thematic focus on women and health, as well as women and climate change. Furthermore, they contribute to an understanding of hyperlocality in the Indian context and beyond by reflecting on who is considered local by whom. The study highlights the dynamics of pointing to the local as always being one level down, and that the locals are always the others from the position of the speaker.

2.1.4 Challenges and opportunities for gender-transformative change

This cluster bundles the ideas formulated in and strategies explained by the case studies prepared by the partner organisations on Ghana, Ukraine and India that could create more gender-equal societies. One strategy that we can find in all three studies focuses on building and contributing to transnational feminist movements. Particularly for the Ghanaian and Indian contexts, the Beijing Declaration, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, was pivotal for women's rights. Equity is framed as a means to achieve gender equality, which stresses the interrelationship between human rights and women's rights. Collectivisation and the building of alliances were mentioned as strong tools to formulate common visions for the future. Strategies that have worked need to be documented and shared. To show the interrelations or intersections of issues concerning gender inequalities and inequities, the studies recommend new narratives that go beyond established discourses.

The Ghanaian case identifies certain civil society organisations and NGOs as the main drivers of change. As levers, the study lists the experiences of advocates and networks as well as the use of media. Strategies that actors have used or could use are pushing for new bills or changing existing drafts, investing in collaboration within and beyond Ghana in the sense of coalition-building, committing to lobby and advocacy work, as well as making bills and laws public that are not working towards gender equality. Furthermore, the study suggests a mapping of critical stakeholders for engagement. The study has also pointed to hindrances in achieving gender equality in the Ghanaian context, with issues concerning the weak political implementation of laws, the unclear application and scope of laws, overall policy designs, limited resource allocation, support systems and funding. In addition, the study sees changes of governments and ministerial rotations as challenging for a sustainable commitment to work towards gender equality. Overall, the study frames a lack of political will for gender equality and the male-dominated legislative system as strong barriers. The study identifies evangelical groups as spoilers that try to lobby for traditional roles for men and women as well as for heteronormativity.[11] For the Indian case, the study differentiates between output and outcome level while following a theory of change. It

11 Heteronormativity can be understood as a rigid structure that tries to control "how men and women should behave, how their bodies should be represented and how their interpersonal relations can be composed" (Saraiva, Santos, & Pereira, 2020, p. 117). It features a binary understanding of gender.

analyses most initiatives as focusing more on outputs than outcomes. As tools, the study presents capacity-building, communication, advocacy and the provision/acquisition of resources. Key actors for achieving gender equality are government bodies, local community leaders, volunteers and peers. The study identifies the collective level as being pivotal to share knowledge, build coalitions, mobilise within communities and contribute to grassroots networks. The Indian study calls for a multi-dimensional empowerment through emotional, educational and economic empowerment to achieve gender equality. The Indian case sees time poverty as a spoiler working against people who are trying to achieve gender equality. The Ukrainian study identifies the bureaucracy as a great hindrance to introducing feminist perspectives and actions. Overall, politics and the military are seen as the most problematic areas for feminism, with the war affecting the possibilities for feminism to act. The study further points to the limited societal space to criticise the military due to their role in defending the country against the Russians and their war of aggression.

Additionally, the studies also determine certain windows of opportunity and entry points for gender-transformative change. The Ghanaian study names the Affirmative Action Act[12] as a relevant law-making process for gender equality in Ghana. It took more than 12 years to get it passed, but in 2024, the parliament finally decided in favour of it. The Indian study sees the HIV movement, sex workers' movement and the Dalit women's movement as all having provided windows of opportunity for the rights of LGBTQIA* communities, the health of HIV-affected people and the rights of Dalit women, respectively. Furthermore, the Beijing Declaration with its Platform for Action are both identified by the Indian study as having built momentum for gender equality and women's rights. For one of the foci for the study on climate action, the Indian case also frames the environmental justice movement as a potential entry point for transformations towards gender equality. Moreover, the Indian case asserts that talking about the role of women instead of their rights can build an entry point for discussions with certain actors, and can then lead to transformative change on a structural level later on. The Ukrainian study presents the Maidan protests as having been a window of opportunity. Women were quite active as volunteers while raising feminist issues as part of the collection of ideas about European integration. In addition, the Ukrainian study names the war situation and recovery context as potential entry points for transformation. The study stresses the relevance of feminist perspectives in the process of post-war development and recovery, with a focus on reproductive and care work against the backdrop of demographic challenges. Furthermore, the study analyses the current situation as being a strong catalyst for positive change for the rights of members in the LGBTQIA* communities. Finally, the study also points to Ukrainian women living abroad who experience different types of relationships and gender roles through a perspective of diaspora feminisms, which might have an impact on Ukrainian societies as well.

All three studies identify the limitations of gender-transformative change in their respective contexts. In the Ghanaian context, the case of the "Proper Human Sexual Rights and Ghanaian Family Values" bill is quite informative, as it is very much in tension with a feminist approach. However, not only the democratically elected parliament, but also the majority of Ghanaians are in favour of it. The bill is framed as protecting children and the youth. It forms part of the narrative of a "global fight" against LGBTQIA* rights pushed forward by religious leaders all over the world. Although it is not being implemented since the president is not signing it, the discourse in Ghana and on Ghana has been influenced. For the Indian case, the question of land rights speaks to the criterion concerning the limitations of gender-transformative change. Even though land rights can be held by women, they are not claiming them and land still often goes to the brothers. A similar limitation can be found in the area of the representation of women on the local level.

12 "The Affirmative Action (Gender Equality) Act 2024 approved minimum 30% female representation in major sectors, gender-responsive budgeting, protections against gender-based discrimination, support for gender equality in political parties, and tax incentives for private entities promoting female employment" (East African Center for Law and Justice, 2024).

Though there are reserved seats for female representatives, women are often only the symbolic figurehead, whereas men in the background (e.g. their husbands or fathers) are taking the decisions. The Ukrainian study points to the limited ecological dimension in Ukrainian feminist movements. Against the background of the war situation, the study further underlines that infrastructural challenges have a great impact on women and other marginalised genders, and that these cannot be addressed sufficiently due to a lack of resources.

2.1.5 Future of gender-transformative policies

On the level of policy recommendations, the case studies prepared by the partner organisations formulate the need to base feminist development and foreign agendas more on human rights and less on economic and geopolitical questions. By that, the studies address the phenomenon of anti-gender backlashes in different contexts that are often part of broader attempts to limit the space and democratic rights of marginalised genders and/or people(s). All three studies express the need for more research on feminist movements and feminist contributions to societal change, given the limited knowledge and studies in three thematic and regional foci chosen by the partners for their studies, namely women, climate and health (in India), feminist perspectives in times of defence and recovery (in Ukraine) and gender-transformative policies (in Ghana).

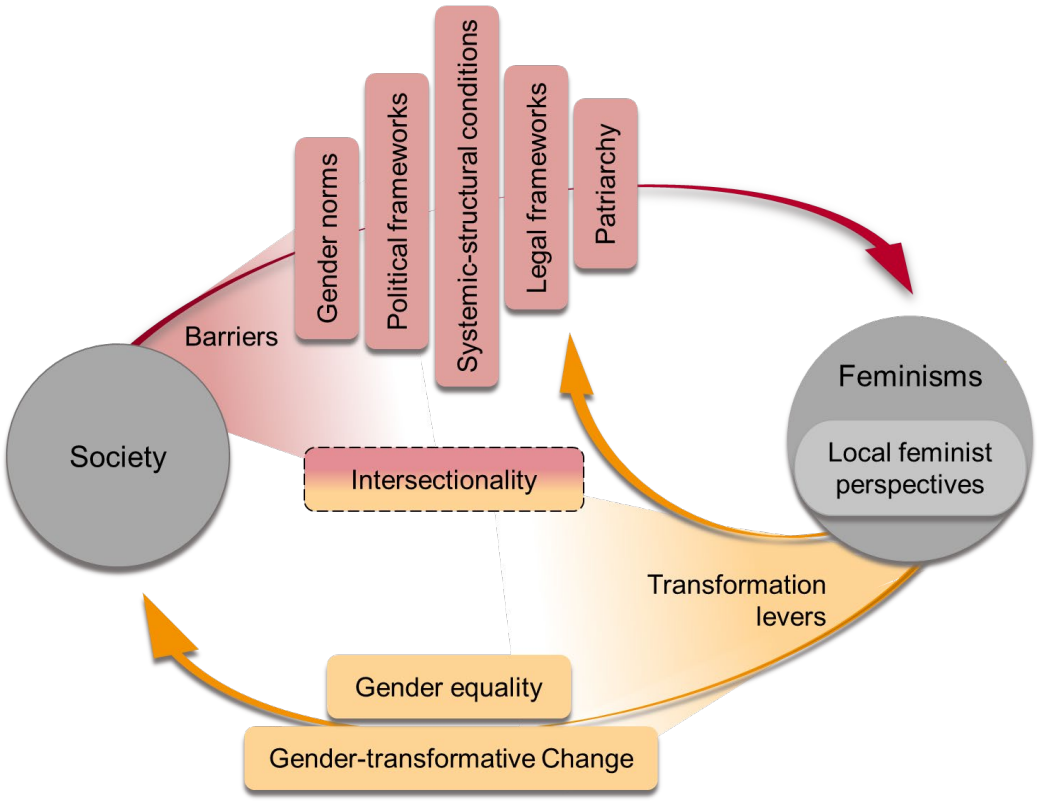
More specifically, the Ghanaian study stresses the need for funding for advocacy, mobilising work and support of networks that is not tied to projects and their objectives. Furthermore, the study identifies intergenerational dialogues and male allies as being key for achieving more gender equality. The Indian study recommends the collection of disaggregated data in the area of gender statistics following an intersectional approach, with a particular focus on the dimensions of religion, caste and gender. For understanding the health–climate nexus from a gendered perspective, they suggest changing the way data are collected. This would lead to knowledge bases about feminisms that are local. To achieve this objective, local organisations need to be strengthened to collect the data accordingly. Also, the Ukrainian study formulates clear recommendations for investments in infrastructure and the need for those investments to address gender equality.

All three studies have gathered data and evidence on issues that cover wide geographical scopes and time periods which have not been collected or analysed in that way before. The teams have conducted fundamental research in the social sciences that could be further developed and picked up in future studies on (local) feminisms. The studies on Ghana and India do not share very optimistic outlooks for the future of gender equality. In Ghana, actors are worried about the over-politicisation of gender issues, particularly in view of elections. In India, the national–religious agenda of the current government sets a difficult framework for more gender equality initiatives. In the Ukrainian case, the study suggests further investigating how to get from feminist perspectives to actions, particularly against the backdrop of ongoing defence, post-war recovery and reconciliation processes. The studies have further contributed to a better understanding of how gender norms can(not) change and how development cooperation can support these processes towards more gender equality. With that, the studies and their feminist ideal also refer to debates in (the study) of development cooperation on questions of fairness, equity, partner orientation as well as (de)coloniality (e.g. Bhambra, 2024; Ziai, 2015).

2.2 Further conceptual discussions

Synthesising the contributions made by the partner organisations through the lens of the developed matrix enables us to further discuss conceptual aspects deduced from the case studies prepared by the partner organisations while reflecting on our guiding concepts and frameworks. To better visualise these reflections against the background of the case studies prepared by the partner organisations, we prepared a figure (Figure 2) that illustrates the different dimensions which have been analysed by the case studies prepared by the partner organisations. We deliberately did not conceptualised the terms used in – and referred to by – the case studies prepared by the partner organisations (see our methodological considerations of this synthesis study). We have asked the partners to apply the concepts to the questions and issues they identify as relevant. With the synthesis, we were able to bring these approaches together and seek to draw broader conclusions in this section.

Figure 2: Local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality



Source: Authors

Description of Figure 2: Feminist groups and individuals face significant challenges in achieving gender-transformative change due to diverse barriers such as patriarchy, gender norms, systemic-structural conditions, and political and legal frameworks. Despite these barriers, local feminist perspectives act as transformation levers towards greater gender equality. They have the potential to address prevailing norms and structures, enhance access to resources and improve the political participation of women, girls and LGBTQIA* communities. Intersectionality is an element that not only makes different intersecting forms of oppression or privilege visible, but also informs strategies and interventions to transform them.

"**Local feminist perspectives**" – as one of the central terms operationalised by the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and referred to in this synthesis study – entails different

conceptualisations while relating to various scholarly debates. To approach an understanding of "local", scholarship from geography is a relevant point of reference, given the importance of scale in this discipline. Local and global are often seen as "the two extremes of our scaled lives" (Herod, 2009, p. 217). Other scales between or linking these extremes can be, among others, national, regional or transnational. Particularly in human geography, politics of scale have been introduced relating to "processes of globalization, localization, (re)regionalization, [and] the hollowing-out of the nation-state" (Herod, 2009, p. 218). In addition, concepts such as "glocal" or "glocalisation" and "hyperlocal" or "hyperlocalisation" have been introduced to reflect on the interlinkages between a local and a global level, and on contestations of what and who counts as local in different contexts. These discussions are also picked up in the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and are further developed. Specifically against the background of the climate and environmental crises – referred to most strongly in the Indian case study – the idea of glocal problems and glocal action has been discussed (e.g. Gupta, van der Leeuw, & de Moel, 2007), while Robertson (2020) assesses a "glocal turn" of globalisation analyses. The notion of hyperlocal is mostly dealt with by scholarship in the field of media and communication referring to the delivery of hyperlocal content for small towns and villages (e.g. Radcliffe, 2012). Also, the case studies prepared by the partner organisations raise questions about who is considered local in which situation, and that one could always go "more" local, in that sense, hyperlocal. The designation of oneself or others as local reflects the positionality of different speakers or viewers, based on different processes of inclusion and exclusion. Depending on where a person or community situates themselves, it stresses different dimensions of their identities. The context very much determines whose perspective is considered local.

We sought to identify the common patterns and differences among various local feminist perspectives while also facilitating a conversation with feminist scholarship on foreign and development policies following feminist agendas. We frame the insights presented by the three case studies from Ghana, India and Ukraine as local and endemic. We were aware of the connotation that this term carries with it in terms of power asymmetries. We wanted to contest these meanings while relating to feminist research, particularly highlighting the relevance of local knowledge(s) and experiences for broader knowledge production on feminisms (see Nylund et al., 2023). By that, we sought to address critiques of "methodological nationalism". Roy (2016), for instance, criticises that viewing the local(s) within national boundaries leads to limitations and suggests instead multi-scalar readings. These multi-scalar readings allow for moving beyond linear assumptions to a flow from global to local sites (Roy, 2016). Against the background of the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and this synthesis study, we intended to contribute to a better understanding of the transnationality, multi-directionality and intersecting scales of feminisms.

What feminism is or who or what claims to be feminist refers to a "multiplicity and cross-border pollination of feminist movements" (McCann, Kim, & Ergun, 2021, p. 7), which was also picked up by the case studies prepared by the partner organisations. Many of these described processes take place simultaneously with debates intersecting, influencing and clashing with each other (McCann et al., 2021). Local and transnational influences contributed to these Western narratives on feminisms. The often referred to "four waves of feminism" (Mohajan, 2022) also help to further discuss the findings of this synthesis study. There are different understandings about when specific waves started and ended, but the first wave of feminism is dated roughly from mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, with voting and equal rights for women being the main objectives.[13] The second wave of feminism started in the 1960s and ended in the 1990s. It focused on reproductive rights, the right to education as well as work and equal pay. In the third wave, from the 1990s to the 2000s, white-middle-class feminism and universal understandings of femininity were challenged by bringing in perspectives from working

13 The first wave was mostly informed by activisms in Europe, North America, Egypt, Iran and India (Malinowska, 2020, p. 2).

class women, women of colour and non-feminine women's concerns. During the third wave, the famous Fourth World Conference on Women took place in Beijing in 1995.[14] It brought in intersectional understandings of gender inequalities. The fourth wave that started in the 2010s and still endures stresses more intersectional approaches as well as new circumstances and challenges for gender equality in the digital space (e.g. #metoo).[15] These waves also played a role in the case studies prepared by the partner organisations by contextualising local feminist perspectives across different time periods and discursive circumstances. This highlights the dynamic relationship between global and local feminisms, in which global waves influenced local movements, and local perspectives, in turn, reshaped global feminist discourse through a multi-directional flow of norms. Interlinked with the different waves of feminism, there are various schools of feminist thought approaching feminism and feminist struggles. These schools consisted of liberal feminists, Marxist feminists, post-modernist feminists and post-colonial feminists (Ackerly & True, 2020, pp. 2-3). Over the years and throughout the different waves of feminism, more schools of thought emerged with anti-colonial feminists, Black feminists, decolonial feminists, disability feminists, ecofeminists, psychoanalytical feminists, queer feminists and radical feminists (Ackerly & True, 2020, pp. 3-4).

With the term "perspective" complementing the concept of **local feminist perspectives**, we wanted to stress that feminisms all over the world build a mosaic of diverse perspectives. With this study, we are only able to provide certain insights into a few of these perspectives through the studies prepared by the partner organisations on contexts in Ghana, Ukraine and India as well as through the contextualising work of this synthesis study. Moreover, the term "perspective" also highlights the situatedness of what we describe and analyse as well as the meaning we ascribe to it as a local feminist perspective in terms of socio-historical, socio-cultural and geographical contexts in addition to philosophical and ideological frameworks (Rendell, 2020; Simandan, 2019). Along spatial and temporal lines, different social actors negotiate their meanings, whereas these actors stand in social and power relations to each other. The case studies prepared by the partner organisations also highlight that meanings are hence always dependent on these different characteristics and are constantly (socially) constructed and contested.

In the area of the study of norms, the case studies prepared by the partner organisations added three concrete analyses of how norms and norm change work. Following Marcus and Somji (2024, p. 6), **gender norms** are "social norms that define acceptable behaviour, roles, entitlements, and gender expression for people" through a gendered perspective.[16] Social norms, in turn, are "collectively shared beliefs about what others typically do and what others approve of, perceive as appropriate, or expect them to do" (Marcus & Somji, 2024, p. 6). Furthermore, norms "are embedded in social, political and economic institutions because they are so taken-for-granted" and as such they "uphold patriarchy, a system of gendered power relations" (Marcus

14 The different world conferences on women took place in 1975 in Mexico City, 1980 in Copenhagen, 1985 in Nairobi and 1995 in Beijing. The Beijing Conference was quite influential for women's rights all over the world and introduced different review and appraisal mechanisms with the Beijing Platform for Action. Ever since the Beijing Conference of 1995, every five years a review and appraisal of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action takes place: 2000 "A five-year review and appraisal", in 2005 "A 10 year and appraisal", in 2010 the 15-year review, in 2015 the 20-year review and appraisal, and 2020 the 25-year review and appraisal.

15 The #metoo movement started in 2017 with several women accusing the producer Harvey Weinstein of sexual harassment. The hashtag was originally introduced in 2006 by activist Tarana Burke, who used it to raise awareness about the abuse of women of colour.

16 According to the International Labour Organization, gender norms have an influence on all areas of life but are particularly influential on questions of paid and unpaid work (International Labour Organization, 2018). The research project "Child Penalty Atlas", for instance, documents the effect of parenthood on gender inequality and shows that women spend more time on unpaid work than men, which has consequences on employment rates (Hub for Equal Representation in the Economy, 2024).

& Somji, 2024, p. 15).[17] As such, gender norms are of a long-term nature and present a certain stickiness informing their hindering character with a view towards gender-transformative change. Moreover, norms and practices are interlinked, as norms are getting reproduced and maintained through practices that "reflect and respond to perceived social expectations" (Marcus & Somji, 2024, p. 15). In this way, norms are not only reproduced but embodied – responding to expectations is rewarded while deviating from them is sanctioned. In view of this performativity, Butler (2024, p. 3) describes "gender" as socio-cultural forms of becoming while framing gender as "co-constructed" (Butler, 2024, p. 33) due to intertwining material and social contributions "in the production of the gendered body" (Butler, 2024, p. 33). The studies present examples of local feminist perspectives while contributing to and forming part of a more multi-directional and transnational perspective of how different scales influence each other and intersect, which also informs our approach to norms for this study. Following Zwingel (2012) and Roy (2016), we seek to challenge an understanding of a unidirectional flow of norms and stress a multidirectionality as well as multi-scalarity. At all scales – being inter alia, local, global and transnational – actors and movements are involved in norm diffusion, influence each other and intersect (León-Himmelstine et al., 2022), which can also be deduced from the partners' contributions.

Intersectionality fulfilled a two-fold function in the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and synthesised their different contributions to the field; it served as a conceptual and analytical tool to make different intersecting forms of marginalisation or privilege visible. Different elements of an identity – being for instance, race, class, gender, sex, ethnicity, citizenship(s), (dis)ability and age – do not stand alone but intersect with each other and describe (intersected) social inequalities (Cho, Crenshaw, & McCall, 2013; Collins, 2015, pp. 2 and 8; Crenshaw, 1991; Hooks, 1981). Particularly in the Indian case study, an intersectional analysis helps in better understanding "intersections of global systems of domination: racism/colonialism, capitalism and patriarchy; and their by-products: classism, homo- and transphobia, cis- and heterosexism, and various forms of racism" (Equinox (Initiative for Racial Justice), 2021, p. 6). A thorough analysis of the multifaceted and interrelated forms of privileges and oppression faced by individuals and groups in a society is imperative for understanding the systemic-structural conditions as well as the political and legal frameworks that act as barriers to gender-transformative change. Furthermore, the concept of intersectionality is crucial for identifying effective strategies and interventions that are not broadly generalised, but instead based on the local perspective and experiences, with the aim of dismantling these complex and interwoven systems.

Gender-transformative change always entails a drastic change from a status quo to a (radical) new status. All three case studies prepared by the partner organisations have analysed the circumstances in their respective contexts and explored entry points for transformative levers towards more gender equality. When looking to the field of transformation studies, we see a strong orientation towards interdisciplinarity and more recent contributions in the field of sustainability studies (Patterson et al., 2017; Pereira et al., 2015; Schneidewind, 2018) that deal with societal, ecological and economic transformations. Gender-transformative change is one element of these sustainability transformations, as they link to societal, ecological and economic issues, respectively. Against this background, transformative approaches and feminist approaches share the understanding and relevance of a process of changing, transforming the status quo towards more social and gender equality. Following MacArthur et al. (2022), gender-transformative change in more detail "aim[s] to reshape gender dynamics by redistributing resources, expectations and responsibilities between women, men, and non-binary gender identities, often focusing on norms, power, and collective action" (MacArthur et al., 2022). The

17 Patriarchy being "a structure of power relations – to explain a system of gendered oppression that does not benefit all men, but still favours the male grip on political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and control of property and assets" (Harper, Marcus, George, & Samman, 2020, p. 10).

case studies prepared by the partner organisations frame gender equality as the first necessary step towards gender equity. With this research, we wanted to contribute to a gendered understanding of sustainability transformations by introducing local feminist perspectives as **transformations levers** towards greater gender equality. Hence, local feminist perspectives were firstly identified, and then secondly, they were analysed through a gender-transformative lens. The concept of "levers" additionally entailed the notion of a leveraging effect of a certain measure, initiative or perspective that could influence other actors, fields or issue areas.

A synthesis of the contributions made by the partner organisations – by grouping the insights into clusters through a clustered matrix – provided a conceptual understanding of these results. This process enabled us to identify and discuss key conceptual themes emerging from the studies, while simultaneously allowing for reflection on our guiding concepts and frameworks. This section establishes a foundation for the contextualisation of local perspectives within global discourses on activism, research and policy-making in the realms of feminism and development. Through this synthesis, we aimed to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and their practical implementation by facilitating a connection between local feminist perspectives and global feminist and development policies. In the concluding section, we draw broader conclusions, propose actionable policy recommendations and outline a way forward that can contribute to a more nuanced approach to feminist development and foreign policies that are grounded in local realities while remaining cognisant of global trends.

3 Conclusions

With this synthesis study, we sought to identify the common patterns and differences among various local feminist perspectives, while also facilitating a conversation with feminist scholarship on foreign and development policies following feminist agendas. All three case studies prepared by the partner organisations have expanded the current state of the art by contributing to the scholarship on the respective local/national contexts as well as on the specific thematic foci of local feminisms. The three case studies prepared by the partner organisations rely for that on primary data that has not been collected or analysed in this way before. In this last section, we want to conclude the synthesis study by discussing its main findings against the background of discourses in feminist activism, feminist research and development cooperation. With that, we address the research questions – presented in the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and picked up by this synthesis study – about local feminist perspectives as transformation levers for greater gender equality. Furthermore, we want to formulate policy recommendations for future feminist development and foreign policy approaches. Finally, we provide outlooks on international processes until 2030 and beyond to show how initiatives at different levels can further contribute towards more gender equality.

The synthesis study, while referring to the case studies prepared by the partner organisations on local feminist perspectives, identified common patterns in existing socio-cultural norms and practices that prevent the implementation of gender-transformative policies. In addition, the synthesis study discussed the diversity of local feminist perspectives in the respective local/national context of the partners. These entailed alternative approaches to development processes that can target prevailing norms and practices. The study moreover reflected on how the different local feminist perspectives can be used as transformation levers towards greater gender equality in the different contexts and beyond. The hindrance faced by local feminist perspectives in influencing policy, decision-making and societal/gender norms due to limited possibilities and restricted opportunities emerges as a consistent theme across all three case studies prepared by the partner organisations and this synthesis study. The following policy recommendations deduced from the study of local feminist perspectives are proposed as transformative levers towards more gender equality:

- **Investing in gender-responsive infrastructure:** The Ukrainian study formulates clear recommendations on the investment in infrastructure (childcare facilities, nursing care homes, women's shelters and gender-based violence support centres) that explicitly address gender equality by considering the needs of women and other marginalised genders, thereby promoting equitable access to resources and opportunities.

- **Advancing research and data collection:** The Indian study also recommends the collection and accessibility of disaggregated data on gender statistics through an intersectional approach, with a particular focus on the dimensions of religion, caste, and gender. This data is crucial for understanding the nuanced experiences of different groups in order to inform targeted interventions and increase awareness about gender inequalities. Intersectional approaches need data on intersecting forms of discrimination.

- **Promoting nuanced intersectional understandings of feminism(s):** The studies emphasise intersectionality and inclusivity and advocate for a more nuanced understanding of feminism(s) for tailored feminist approaches. This includes recognising the role of digital activism and the need for systemic changes to address gender-based violence and enhance women's political representation. It is also required to explore the intersections of anti-democratic movements and anti-gender campaigns to better understand their mutual reinforcement, as this understanding is critical for designing effective initiatives to promote gender equality.

- **Mapping feminist movements and contributions:** All three studies express the need for more research on feminist movements and feminist contributions to societal change, given the limited knowledge in three thematic and regional foci chosen by the partners for their study, namely women and health, women and climate action (in India), feminist perspectives in times of defence and recovery (in Ukraine) and gender-transformative policies (in Ghana).

- **Facilitating advocacy for networks via cooperation:** The Ghanaian study stresses the need to provide flexible funding to facilitate advocacy, mobilisation and networks that is not tied to projects' specific objectives. The funding should facilitate the development of transnational networks and solidarity aimed at promoting gender equality and equity. The study underscores the importance of addressing cultural, structural and systemic barriers to women's rights and representation.

- **Applying context-sensitive approaches to feminist agendas:** A convincing strategy for implementing feminist policies, in both external and domestic affairs, is to adopt context sensitive approaches that assess whether the country is more open to feminist agendas or dialogues on – and cooperation for – human rights or political participation for all genders. Overall, feminist development and foreign agendas offer to base approaches more on human rights and less on economic and geopolitical concerns.

With a view towards discourses in feminist activism, feminist research and development cooperation (e.g. compiled by Chaturvedi et al., 2020; León-Himmelstine et al., 2022), this study has contributed by analysing the role of norms and feminist movements to norm changes. Furthermore, the call for more intersectional approaches formulated by the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and picked up by this synthesis study is very vocal in discourses pushed forward by feminist activists and women's rights movements globally (Bonu Rosenkranz, 2024). Additionally, the line of argument around barriers and hindrances for women's and feminist groups and individuals working towards more gender equality and ultimately equity thematised by feminist activists is a common pattern in all three case studies prepared by the partner organisations and this synthesis study. Phenomena such as NGOisation, little core funding for advocacy work and (transnational) networks have been criticised against the background of the limited influence of women's rights and feminist groups globally. These circumstances consequently hinder local feminist perspectives from contributing

towards policy- and decision-making and to norm changes, given the limited possibilities and spaces different actors have and can use to bring their expertise and experiences. Last but definitely not least, the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and this synthesis study see a great potential in building solidarity and collaborative transnational networks for gender equality and equity. This aspect of transnational networks bringing together different actors beyond state actors might only become more relevant when it is observed that several states are distancing themselves from feminist ideals and are contributing to anti-gender movements (see on Europe, Wittenius, 2022; on the international anti-gender movement, McEwen & Narayanaswamy, 2023).

Furthermore, by looking at discourses in research on feminist development and foreign policy, this study – in reference to the case studies prepared by the partner organisations – can provide some relevant insights on questions of institutionalisation and limitations of a feminist agenda. Considering Sweden's political turn and other contexts all over the globe where right-wing ideologies are influencing or even determining politics, discourses in research on feminist development and foreign policy raise critical questions about what a feminist foreign agenda can achieve and how feminist ideals can be institutionalised beyond legislative shifts with changing political priorities. The case studies prepared by the partner organisations and this synthesis study have pointed to the need to follow context-sensitive approaches. Some contexts might not be open for an agenda that is described as "feminist"; instead, more context-sensitive framings such as dialogues on and cooperation for human rights or political participation for all genders could be more successful. Against this background, Sowa (2023), for instance, also suggests development projects that engage more with feminist activists, are inclusive and encourage collaboration to achieve meaningful progress comparatively more easily than projects that merely enforce policies and decisions from external sources. This approach not only applies to partner countries, but it could also be a convincing strategy for domestic actors criticising a "feminist" agenda (e.g. Bruder et al., 2024).

In the discourses about the field of development cooperation, this research indicates certain interesting overlaps as well. Given that a feminist agenda is very much interlinked with questions about decolonisation, this research has also reflected upon power shifts of global politics and questions concerning the deconstructing logics of donors and receivers of development aid, referring to debates on beyond aid and new South(s) (e.g. Ishmael, 2024). With insights on local feminist perspectives from Ghana, Ukraine and India as well as a synthesis of how they speak to each other and the discourses and debates in the scholarship and activism of feminists, we sought to be reflexive of the inherent power asymmetries in the knowledge production of and on feminism(s). However, we aimed to go beyond being reflexive and attentive by bringing these different understandings of feminism(s) together following a feminist research ethic and highlighting the role of local knowledge(s) and marginalised experiences for feminism(s).

We suggest that future research should focus more on the intersections between anti-democratic and anti-gender movements to better understand how these two work together and reinforce each other, particularly against the background of anti-gender campaigns, which were identified by the studies as barriers to gender-transformative change. To gather more knowledge on these entanglements, a more local, endemic perspective is key, especially for policymakers designing initiatives targeting marginalised groups and genders. In that regard, the case studies prepared by the partner organisations indicate relevant points of reference. Furthermore, and related to the first aspect of suggestions, we want to underline other analyses' findings on the missing link between feminist development and foreign policies to other policy fields (e.g. finance policy or education policy) (Zilla, 2024), indicating a call for gender-mainstreaming in all policy fields to achieve transformative change.

These policy recommendations are not just limited to academic discourse, but are also gaining support from policymakers in development cooperation. One such example is from Germany's latest strategy for cooperation with civil society, where one of the objectives is to "strengthen

partnerships with Global South civil society, particularly feminist groups, by integrating local knowledges" (BMZ, 2024a). Through the synthesis study, we also observed that strengthening networks and partnerships is a highly effective strategy for balancing the impacts of shifts in funding priorities or policies on feminist objectives. Overall, one can argue that local feminist perspectives and ideas are increasingly shaping global policies. Despite global anti-gender campaigns, the rise of far-right governments and autocratic tendencies, some of these foundational feminist principles are providing fertile ground for advancing feminist agendas in emerging policy landscapes.

At the time of finalising this synthesis study at the end of 2024, the world looks quite different from when this project was planned in 2022 and when it started in 2023. The Swedish government has decided to withdraw from an FFP approach, and in other countries with a feminist development and foreign policy approach, this engagement is increasingly contested, for example in Germany and France. Although scholarship has already reacted to these shifts and has analysed – in the case of Sweden – that this political turn is not as influential in actually changing these political priorities that easily (Bergman Rosamond, 2024), the overall contexts for feminist initiatives have changed. In addition to these changes of governmental priorities in the field of feminist policies, achievements of women's and feminist groups in the area of reproductive rights are being contested, and in some cases, as in the United States reversed, infamously by overturning the judgment of Roe vs Wade on abortion rights. Reproductive rights were even a key element of Democratic candidate Kamala Harris' election campaign in the United States in 2024, but the majority of voters decided to vote for Donald Trump, who made these overturns of abortion rights possible in the first place by nominating more conservative judges for the Supreme Court during his first presidency. In parallel to this domestic dimension of Trump's re-election and other restrictions on the rights of women and marginalised genders, these developments also have an inter- and transnational dimension, with these trends also influencing other contexts. In other democratic states as well, the rights of marginalised genders are being contested, for instance the radical right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland in Germany has included restrictions on reproductive rights in their party manifesto for the early federal elections in Germany in 2025.

What is the future for feminist initiatives towards more gender equality? On an international level, the next High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2025 in New York could be used to call for more commitments to gender equality among participating states and non-state actors. The 2025 HLPF will be organised under the theme "Advancing sustainable, inclusive, science- and evidence-based solutions for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals for leaving no one behind", which entails – through its focus on inclusivity – an entry point for issues of gender equality as well. In 2025, inter alia, in-depth reviews are being organised for SDG 5 as well as SDGs 3, 8, 14 and 17. Looking at the focus of the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and this synthesis study, it is of additional interest to follow and comment on Ghana's, India's and Germany's presentations of their voluntary national reviews and those of 36 other countries. There are only five years left to achieve the goals set in 2015, and different actors are already reflecting on a post-2030 agenda, respectively a post-SDG agenda. The case studies prepared by the partner organisations and this synthesis study provide evidence that gender equality needs to be a prominent part of these reflections to ensure more gender-equal futures.

Looking at the topic of this study, another relevant international process that the world will celebrate in 2025 will be the 30th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the Beijing Declaration. The Commission on the Status of Women will take place for the 69th time in New York at the beginning of 2025. Referring to the insights gathered by the case studies prepared by the partner organisations and the scholarship in the broader field, it is questionable if and how this momentum could be used to build and fill with life a new narrative for gender equality globally. Particularly against the backdrop of anti-gender campaigns in certain parts of the world, actors at different levels need to build alliances to counterbalance the efforts to restrict

rights. Such a counterbalance could be brought in by the informal group of states at the UN for feminist approaches (see Aggestam & True, 2024). It could be further utilised by state representatives but also by other stakeholders to make the commitment to gender equality more visible and vocal. This group can have an inward and outward effect, given the international expectations placed on states (see Towns et al., 2024). The examples of Sweden and the Netherlands show that, although these two in particular have been dealing with their feminist legacies differently within more right-wing oriented governments, both countries have not really stopped their feminist approaches in their foreign policies, but have continued with them, with Sweden just not calling it "feminist", and the Netherlands even published a handbook on how to implement their FFP.[18] These examples are also relevant for the future engagement of other states that might follow the Swedish and Dutch examples without really withdrawing from the policy. These governmental decisions will shape the possibilities for local feminist perspectives to contribute to more gender-equal futures.

18 Dutch Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation announced its commitment to pursue an FFP on 8 November 2022, in a letter to the House of Representatives. The government published a handbook in December 2024 to support the implementation of FFP (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

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Annex

Executive summaries of case studies prepared by the partner organisations

Executive summary from the Ghanaian case study

Ghana is a multi-party, multi-ethnic and multi-religious state, which practices legal pluralism – a system which recognises customary law in addition to the constitution. Even though the constitution is superior to the customary law, most Ghanaians are subject to customary law, which discriminates against women. Women's rights activism has a long history in Ghana spanning over a century. While feminists' advocacy has made great gains, Ghana – like many other countries – is not likely to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which is gender equality, by 2030. Gender inequality persists due to the coexistence of gender-inequitable norms and the lax enforcement of the existing laws that protect women. Social norms and behaviours continue to impact opportunities and human potential, affecting health, education and productivity.

There is little understanding of how local Ghanaian feminists have influenced past and recent transformative gender policies in Ghana. The goal of this study is to understand feminism in Ghana and how feminists' experiences could be harnessed to achieve more gender-transformative change. The study is part of the research project "Local Feminist Perspectives as Transformation Levers for Greater Gender Equality". In partnership with IDOS, the German Institute of Development and Sustainability, the project explores the potential of local feminist perspectives to act as levers for transformative change for greater gender equality in Ghana, India and Ukraine. The aim of the study in Ghana is to explore and analyse contemporary local feminist perspectives (organising) in Ghana to demonstrate how they can be used as levers for transformative change for greater equality and sustainable development.

The research questions that guided the study are:

i. How do existing socio-cultural norms and practices and the prevailing systemic/structural conditions prevent sustainable, gender-transformative policies?

ii. How have local feminist perspectives influenced past and recent gender-transformative policies in Ghana?

iii. How can local perspectives be used as transformative levers for sustainable development?

iv. Which alternative approaches to development processes can local feminist perspectives offer to target prevailing norms and practices?

The study was fully qualitative and cross-sectional involving 35 feminists and women's rights advocates between the ages of 37 and 80+ years, with the majority (n=25) having over 20 years of experience and relevant postgraduate degrees. The findings of the study very much aligned with the theoretical framework selected for the study, the gender at work framework, which considers gender inequity as a phenomenon that traverses from formal to informal spaces, as well as individual to systemic/structural domains.

Our results reveal a myriad of informal and exclusionary customary practices that infringe on the fundamental human rights of Ghanaian women. These practices are rooted in the patriarchal structures that normalise male dominance and control over women, shaping societal attitudes and behaviours toward women's rights and autonomy. These exclusionary customary practices include the practice of bride price, widowhood rites, child marriage, female genital mutilation,

and witch-hunting. Apart from the informal laws that discriminate against women, there are also gender inequalities that manifest in formal spaces. These forms of inequality are systemic and structural in nature. Instances of these are the lack of political will and delays in legislative instruments; the high turnover of responsible leaders; a lack of resources and state infrastructure to support women at the workplace; sexual harassment; labour discrimination due to women's reproductive roles; the gender wage gap; and gender-blind policies and laws. Other discriminatory practices that are apparent at the level of individual practices are those connected to inadequate access to resources and conscientisation.

Further, the study revealed that feminists in Ghana utilise several strategies to improve gender equality. These include advocacy and lobbying; collaboration and coalition-building; enlisting non-feminist allies; generation of research and evidence; consultative meetings and dialogues; support for the drafting and review of instruments; monitoring the implementation of existing laws, and the subsequent review of passed laws. Some of the landmark achievements resulting from feminists' work include the passage of the Domestic Violence Act (DV Act), the Land Act, and the Affirmative Action Gender Equity Act. Our results showed that feminists and women's rights advocates were in general satisfied with the effectiveness of their outlined strategies and that they hoped to maintain them in the future.

Feminists have encountered several challenges including declining funding, lack of support from political actors, and backlash. To sustain the work of feminists they call for the institutionalisation of intergenerational dialogues on gender and women's issues, along with the intensification of the recruitment of non-feminist allies. They believe that these strategies would ensure both the continuity and effectiveness of the movement in driving change.

The following policy recommendations are made based on the insights of this study:

i. A key challenge reported by participants was the waning funding for feminists/CSO (civil society organisation) activities. Considering that the advocacy activities of feminists such as lobbying, capacity-building, meetings and sensitisation measures require logistics, it is important that the state commits funds to their activities in a sustainable way. The government should set up a research fund where a percentage of the country's GDP will be deposited: Feminists could apply for available funding to conduct research into women's inequality issues. Findings from these studies could in turn inform policy on women's inequality issues.

ii. Advocacy by feminists in Ghana for local gender-transformative policies and laws is based on the realisation of international human rights provisions. The evidence shows that success requires persistence and the constant rallying of feminists around specific bills and policies over many years. Hence, development partners should support the core funding for women's rights organisations as well as creating a funding cycle to support women's rights organising and activities surrounding specific bills or policies. In this way, energy and advocacy for specific bills/policies will be sustained.

iii. A major bottleneck to the timely processing of gender-related policies is the high ministerial rotations in relevant ministries. It is therefore important to institute a permanent policy desk at the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection. This would ensure stability and continuity in the development of policies during changes in ministers and governments.

iv. Ignorance and a lack of awareness and capabilities on the part of individuals regarding gender inequity is widespread in Ghana leading to the perpetration of gender inequities. It is recommended that "gender", as a cross-cutting phenomenon, be introduced into educational curricula at various levels of education. The feminists believe that early and timely education on gender will increase gender consciousness and equity among the younger generation to break the cycles of gender-inequitable attitudes and beliefs passed on through customs and cultures.

Feminists in Ghana have made great strides in fighting for the cause of women. They have been successful in pushing for the passage of formal laws and policies that protect the rights of women. However, considering the persistence of patriarchal norms in Ghana, the laws and policies are not enough to bring about gender-transformative change in everyday lives. A change in gender attitudes requires a consistent and resilient effort, especially in the areas of awareness creation and empowerment. Outcomes will include an improvement in individual knowledge and awareness of their constitutional rights and privileges, what constitutes abuse, and access to legal and support services. Meanwhile, there is a lack of political will on the side of duty bearers to adopt gender-transformative policies. This calls for a non-state “conscience” on gender to drive change by closing the gap between formal laws and policies and the lived experiences of women by increasing individual and grassroot demand for gender equality, while measures are taken to deal with the systemic factors. The lack of core funding for feminist and women’s rights organisations over the decades, therefore, will attenuate this otherwise great synergistic impact of driving change through the push for formal laws and policies alongside sensitisation measures and support. Support from government and key development partners for activities in support of feminism in Ghana will be crucial in bringing about the transformative change.

Executive summary from the Indian case study

At a time when global frameworks like the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (United Nations, 1995) and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are calling for a renewed commitment to gender equality, India stands at a crossroads. The country's feminist discourse has been shaped by both historical milestones, such as the Towards Equality Report (1974) which exposed entrenched gender disparities, and the ongoing struggles of grassroots women's movements confronting caste, class and religious oppressions. However, despite progress in education, political representation and public health, India is ranked 129th out of 146 countries in the Global Gender Gap Report 2024 (World Economic Forum, 2024), reflecting persistent disparities in economic participation, agency and health outcomes.

Drawing on insights from critical feminist theory and diverse women's and social movements, this project explores the transformative potential of local feminist perspectives in addressing systemic gender inequalities in India. The study selected two themes: women's health and climate action (given their interconnectedness and impact on multiple dimensions of human development) to understand how community-based organisations (CBOs) working on women's issues have challenged patriarchal norms and built agency and decision-making capacities for their communities, particularly women. The study also analyses various strategies adopted by these organisations informed by the lived realities of women, to address the intersectionality between oppressions that shape women's experiences in both health and climate action.

Using a qualitative, multi-method approach, this study integrates primary and secondary data sources to ensure depth and comprehensiveness. A thorough literature review informed the research framework, analysing global and national policy documents, gender-related interventions and intersectional analyses. Primary data collection encompassed 31 key informant interviews (KIIs), comprising 12 discussions with experts in gender, health and climate action and 19 interviews with representatives of grassroots organisations. Additionally, a stakeholder dialogue with 40 participants was organised to gain insights into the discourse of feminisms in India and about their contribution towards challenging systemic inequalities. The event included NGOs, CBOs, feminist collectives and academia who provided insights into localised knowledge creation on gender, the formation of grassroots women's leadership and the development of innovative strategies to address the intersectionality between oppressions women face.

Key findings

Local feminist praxis: The feminist landscape in India is characterised by its diversity, shaped by a multiplicity of feminisms that reflect the lived realities of a heterogeneous society. Indian feminisms are deeply rooted in local contexts, addressing the intersections of caste, class, sexuality, religion, disability and environment. The distinct strands of feminisms (such as Dalit feminism, queer feminism, eco-feminism, sex worker's movement and others) collectively form a pluralistic and adaptive framework that address the country's sociocultural and political complexities.

Women's movements in India have played a transformative role in challenging patriarchal structures (at the level of household, community and state) and amplifying marginalised voices. Organisations like Khabar Lahariya (News Wave), a women-led rural media collective, challenge traditional media paradigms by enabling rural women to narrate their own stories and build agency. By reclaiming narratives, using digital technology and fostering community-driven solutions, such organisations enrich feminist advocacy frameworks with locally rooted insights. The formation of women's groups, women's networks and alliances with other social movements (including Dalit, queer and sex workers) have enriched and expanded local feminist perspectives in the country. The institutionalisation of feminism in India's higher education has created a discursive space for engaging with various forms of inequalities, especially gender.

Women and health inequalities: The intersection of caste, class, sexuality and disability significantly amplifies health inequities for women in India, creating systemic barriers that extend beyond access to healthcare services. Despite policy advancements, deeply ingrained gender norms, societal biases and structural inequalities continue to constrain women's decision-making power and right to their body, particularly in areas like reproductive, sexual, mental and menstrual health. These compounded challenges demand an intersectional approach to health equity. In addition, women are still considered as a homogeneous entity in health policy and programmes. This narrow approach to women's health dismisses the heterogeneous identity of women (shaped by class, caste, religion and other forms of social markers). There is an urgent need to adopt a multi-dimensional approach while designing policies and programmes for women's health that address systemic discrimination and social norms alongside service delivery.

Organisations like MASUM (Mahila Sarvangeen Utkarsh Mandal) exemplify participatory health education models, conducting menstrual hygiene workshops that empower women to advocate for their own health needs. CBOs, such as the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) (a sex workers' collective), address not just health but situate health within societal dynamics influencing health-seeking behaviour and access to healthcare. Government interventions in the form of self-help groups (SHGs) and Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) have also emerged as good models to combat health inequities, bridging gaps in rural healthcare delivery and improving immunisation coverage, maternal care and access to health information.

While India's health policies, such as the National Health Mission, have made strides in service delivery, they often adopt a narrow technocratic focus that prioritises measurable outcomes through behavioural interventions over structural and cultural dimensions of health equity. To achieve transformative health outcomes, policy frameworks must embed gender-sensitive and intersectional approaches that recognise health as a collective and social concern rather than an individual issue. Additionally, greater collaborations between CBOs working on gender and governmental initiatives are essential for catalysing social change.

Women and climate action: Climate crises disproportionately impact women, particularly those in rural and economically marginalised communities. Women's roles as primary caregivers and contributors to agriculture amplify their exposure to climate-related risks. As key providers of water, fuel and food for their households, women face increased burdens due to resource depletion caused by droughts, erratic rainfall and land degradation. Traditional gender norms further relegate women to unpaid or low-wage labour, limiting their access to adaptive technologies, resources and decision-making opportunities. Despite their heightened vulnerability to climate hazards, women remain underrepresented in climate policies and governance structures, highlighting the critical need for inclusive, gender-sensitive approaches that centre women's experiences and leadership.

Community initiatives demonstrate the transformative potential of women-led climate action, fostering resilience and driving sustainable development. For example, solar technician training programmes empower rural women to assemble and install solar energy systems, simultaneously addressing energy needs and providing sustainable livelihoods. In Uttarakhand, women farmers have championed the cultivation of climate-resilient crops like millets, enhancing food security while promoting sustainable agricultural practices. Community-led water management projects, such as the restoration of traditional water sources, have also enabled women to mitigate the impacts of water scarcity and droughts. These localised interventions highlight how empowering women as active participants in climate solutions not only addresses their vulnerabilities, but also positions them as agents of transformative change.

India's climate policies, including the National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC) and State Action Plans on Climate Change (SAPCC), largely adopt a gender-neutral approach, failing to address the differentiated impacts of climate change on women. While these policies

recognise women's vulnerabilities in principle, they often exclude women as active contributors to climate adaptation and mitigation efforts. To address these gaps, policy reforms must integrate intersectional analyses, prioritise women's leadership in climate governance and allocate resources for gender-responsive actions.

Learnings and recommendations

Integrating intersectionality in policies and programmes: To address systemic inequities in health and climate action, cross-sectoral policy reforms must integrate intersectional frameworks that acknowledge overlapping oppressions of gender, caste, class and disability. Embedding intersectionality in programmes ensures that marginalised groups receive tailored support to overcome barriers and participate in transformative change. Gender-responsive governance should actively include women, particularly from marginalised communities, in decision-making processes across sectors. Since the last two decades, "intersectionality"[19] has been a part of the discourse of global and local feminisms; however, a similar approach has neither been a policy priority nor has it been adopted while designing interventions for achieving gender equality.

Community-led approaches and collaborations with community members: For fostering ownership and long-term impact, interventions must be co-created and led by the community to reflect the lived realities of those most affected by systemic inequities (e.g., the dictionary of violence by Nirantar, women's federations, and health interventions led by DMSC). Engaging women as partners – not just beneficiaries – in designing initiatives, such as climate-resilient agricultural practices or community health plans, ensures that programmes are context-specific and culturally relevant. Investing in strengthening leadership of grassroots women through training programmes will enhance their decision-making capacities, financial literacy and advocacy skills. These competencies will help them form networks and amplify their influence in both community and policy settings.

For making policy contextual, intersectional and intersectoral, it is essential to include community representatives within the process of planning. All government initiatives should be designed in collaboration with the community to address both behavioural and structural changes.

Innovation of process and product: Innovations must prioritise technologies and investment strategies that align with the needs of marginalised women. Health-tech and climate-tech innovations, such as mobile-based health platforms and solar energy training programmes, can address systemic barriers while creating sustainable livelihoods. These technologies must be designed with accessibility in mind, particularly for women with limited literacy or digital skills. Donor collaboration is crucial, but the funding model needs to be revamped. The funding model requires a shift from short-term, outcome-driven funding to a long-term investment that prioritises community engagement, resilience-building and capacity development

Finally, **capacity building and awareness** efforts must focus on social norms, especially patriarchal norms and their harmful impacts within communities and households, as well as the consequential focus on behavioural shifts, using innovative pedagogies that connect with lived realities. The content of learning should demystify gender-related myths and adopt an equity

19 The term "intersectionality" was coined in 1989 by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw. Intersectionality focuses on uncovering and understanding the experiences and challenges faced by individuals who occupy multiple and intersecting group identities. The central ideas of intersectionality have long historic roots – black activists and feminists, as well as post-colonial, queer and other scholars have all produced work that reveals the interdependent complex social norms and systems that shape human lives.

perspective. Capacity building programmes for local leaders, NGOs and government officials should address the interconnected challenges of gender, health and climate, fostering cross-sector collaboration and equipping stakeholders with intersectional, gender-sensitive strategies. To address patriarchal norms, targeted awareness campaigns should engage all members of the family and communities, challenging deep-seated cultural biases and normalising women's participation in public and private decision-making spaces.

Conclusion

Local feminist perspectives provide a transformative lens for addressing systemic inequities in health and climate action, centring the need for intersectional, community-led and collaborative approaches. These perspectives illuminate how grassroots movements can dismantle entrenched social norms, amplify the agency of marginalised women, and develop scalable, context-specific solutions that challenge structural barriers. Realising this vision requires sustained collaboration among women's federations, women's movements, women's advocacy groups, policymakers, and donors, as well as long-term financing models, sustained capacity building and different metrics to measure impact. Through these concerted efforts, India can contribute to a future that transcends national boundaries, championing equity and justice as foundational principles for sustainable development.

Executive summary from the Ukrainian case study

This study follows a structure that moves from the general to the specific. It begins with an explanation of the research context and conceptual dilemmas, followed by key findings. At the end of each section, a detailed summary of the data and expert insights is provided. The research timeline spans 2014-2024, corresponding to the duration of Russia's war against Ukraine, with a particular emphasis on the period of the full-scale invasion from 2022 to 2024.

Context. In 2024, feminism in Ukraine celebrated its 140th anniversary, highlighting a long history of women advocating for rights, despite societal and political challenges. The Revolution of Dignity (2013-2014), the start of Russia's war against Ukraine (since 2014), and the active participation of women in volunteering and military efforts during these events sparked significant gender debates and reforms. Unlike Russia's use of conservatism in state ideology, Ukraine embraced gender equality and LGBT+ rights as part of its European integration.

Although the full-scale invasion in 2022 exacerbated typical gender issues and created new ones, the mere existence and number of these issues do not indicate a "backlash". Ukrainian society and the state responded to war-related problems in an emancipatory manner, and progress in gender equality at the level of state policies, public attitudes towards gender roles and public discourse were still perceptible as of December 2024. Ukrainian feminists are trying to lead the public debate towards gender equality and social inclusion and embed them into state policies during the ongoing defence and recovery. **The main research puzzle of this paper is the persistence of gender-transformative (feminist) policies during the war.** We focus on examining the impact that feminist perspectives and actions have on gender-transformative changes in Ukraine, and on how the achievements of the Ukrainian feminist movement can serve as a foundation for developing sustainable gender-transformative (feminist) policies in the future.

The **research methodology** is based on a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative (survey of 720 participants) and qualitative (20 expert interviews and 5 focus group discussions) methods, which were used partly in parallel. The toolkit of the three methods was coordinated in such a way that the data related to the same thematic blocks were comparable. As an additional method, analysis of data from open sources was used: state statistics, data from representative surveys, advocacy initiatives of the feminist movement (e.g. petition texts) and legislation on gender equality.

Background of gender equality in Ukraine – desk study

The **results of the desk research** show that Ukraine has entered a full-scale war in 2022 with progress in reducing gender gaps and stable state policies for gender equality. For example, the gap in the average monthly salaries of women and men was reduced from 25.4% in 2016 to 18.6% in 2021, and important policies, for example gender quotas on lists of political parties (2019), were introduced. In 2022-2024 Ukrainian society and the state responded to gender issues, exacerbated by the full-scale invasion, in an emancipatory manner. Five new state policies on gender equality were adopted.

Although war-related challenges weigh heavily on both Ukrainian women and feminist organisations, this burden has not created a trend of strengthening conservative ideas in public opinion, as reflected in surveys as of December 2024. On the contrary, sociological polls indicate slow but steady progress towards an egalitarian distribution of gender roles and increased support for equal rights for LGBT+ people. This progress should be cautiously evaluated, as it shows that perceptions about women's public roles are evolving faster than those about their private roles. For example, a representative survey conducted in March 2023 showed that, compared to 2021, the share of Ukrainians who believed that "men are better leaders than women" decreased (from 43% to 24%), as well as those who believed that "the main purpose of a woman

is to give birth to children" (from 64% to 59%) (Ukrainian Veteran's Fund, 2023). This gap creates conditions for contradictory perceptions about women, and stereotypes and biases will continue to be fundamental barriers to gender-transformative changes across various sectors.

Feminism in Ukraine remains active and visible, organising movement-building events and advocacy initiatives (including three successful petitions to state authorities, participation in the development of the above-mentioned state policies and the creation of an Alliance to Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women in Ukraine's Recovery Process) as well as providing support for vulnerable groups.

The impact of feminism on gender-transformative changes – limitations and opportunities

Empirical analysis of data obtained by quantitative survey and the qualitative methods of our research showed that the majority of quantitative survey participants (67%) believed that feminist perspectives have a moderate impact on Ukrainian society. The spheres where these perspectives are hindered the most are politics (82% hinder, 18% impact) and the military (75% hinder, 11% impact). They are followed by the spheres of economics (43% hinder, 9% impact), security (41% hinder, 7% impact) and family (45% hinder, 22% impact). The greatest impact is believed to be in the spheres of media (17% hinder, 66% impact), culture (16% hinder, 61% impact), civil society (24% hinder, 51% impact) and education (28% hinder, 41% impact). These results align with perceptions about who supports, ignores or opposes feminism in Ukraine. Women's rights activists emerge as the strongest group of supporters, whereas sexists, conservatives and religious organisations form a distinct group of opponents. Donors and civil society are closer to the supporters, but the picture is less definitive. Key societal actors such as the state, education institutions, the general public, employers and political parties are noted as largely ignoring feminist perspectives.

The quantitative survey results for some issues contrast with expert interviews, which assess feminism's impact as significant, particularly in politics and the military. This discrepancy arises because experts evaluated both current influence and progress over the past 10-20 years, drawing on their knowledge of legislative changes, state policies and advocacy initiatives (detailed in Section 3). In contrast, survey participants reflect broader public opinion, focusing on the present and not perceiving the daily impact of these changes. Possible explanations for the low level of influence of state gender policies on daily life include: 1) the negative connotation of feminism in society, which affects public figures' willingness to raise feminist topics; 2) the gap between national policies and local-level implementation practices; 3) a formal approach to implementation due to a lack of awareness, knowledge and skills among local implementers; 4) insufficient resources at the local level and the overburdening of local government employees (mostly women) without proper resources or formal instructions.

Stereotypes and biases were identified as fundamental barriers to gender-transformative changes across various sectors.

Russia's full-scale invasion has had a contradictory impact on the opportunities for feminism to influence gender-transformative changes. It reinforced gender stereotypes about "traditionally male" spheres, with experts noting a decreased influence of women in decision-making due to the perception of war as a "male domain". Women's organisations had to shift their focus to emergency issues, prioritising survival over strategic development and relegating some topics. On the other hand, the crisis has necessitated the optimal use of human resources in the military and economic sectors, creating a "window of opportunity" that promotes the inclusion of more women in "traditionally male" professions. Additional "windows of opportunity" for feminist impact are Ukraine's aspiration for European integration and the demands of donors and international partners. The relocation of millions of Ukrainian women abroad and their exposure to more egalitarian values may lead to the popularisation of feminist ideas in the long term. These opposing tendencies coexist, overlap and conflict with each other, likely contributing to the

situation reflected in sociological polls (detailed in Section 3), which show slow but steady progress towards an egalitarian distribution of gender roles since 2014 – a trend that has continued even after 2022.

Feminist perspectives

The analysis of research data highlights how participants perceived the Ukrainian feminist agenda and identified the feminist perspectives (topics, ideas, approaches, proposals and demands) they considered most prevalent, taking into account temporal dynamics (before, during and after the full-scale invasion).

Consistent perspectives: prevention of and combating violence against women, women's economic rights, prevention of discrimination against women.

Perspectives receiving less attention: social inclusion and empathy towards women, combating sexual and reproductive exploitation (e.g. surrogacy), women's labour rights (including unpaid caregiving labour, status of women in feminised and caregiving professions), social protection issues (including in the context of factors affecting the return of refugees), intersectionality, particularly regarding the rights of LGBT+ people.

War-related perspectives: women's rights in the army, status of women in the security and defence sector, sexual violence related to the conflict.

Perspectives on recovery and post-war reconstruction: the issue of reproductive (caregiving) work and the supporting infrastructure, demographic challenges and the expected reproductive pressure on women, challenges of veterans' reintegration (including possible rise of gender-based violence), women's entry into "traditionally male" professions, women's political participation, including challenges of prioritising the political representation of former military personnel (the majority of whom are men) and the risk of obstacles to the exercise of political rights by those who left the country during the war (the majority of whom are women). Experts warned against viewing post-war reconstruction as mere restoration, emphasising the need for inclusive restructuring and systematic integration of feminist approaches.

The precise role of feminist perspectives in driving gender-transformative changes is difficult to measure with scientific accuracy. However, an indirect confirmation of the influence of these perspectives can be seen in the positive dynamics of gender equality in Ukraine since 2014, because changes do not occur overnight. Their slow, yet gradual growth is a testament to the realised impact, and to the fact that the full-scale invasion, as of December 2024, has not stopped the progress of gender-transformative changes (as detailed in Section 3). State gender policies implemented in 2022-2024 align thematically with perspectives that are constant and dominant in the Ukrainian feminist agenda (combating violence against women, women's economic rights, the prevention of discrimination against women). At the same time, structural barriers described in Section 4 highlight the limitations of feminist perspectives, particularly as quantitative research participants emphasised that key societal actors largely ignore (but do not oppose) feminist perspectives.

Feminist actions

The empirical analysis demonstrates how participants perceived the translation of feminist perspectives into feminist actions (organisations, projects, initiatives, programmes, campaigns led by feminists and (pro)feminist initiatives by other actors).

The forms of feminist actions most frequently mentioned by participants primarily belong to **advocacy**, namely informational campaigns, educational projects, supporting women's groups and initiatives, and engaging in activism and protests. Participants also noted the significant

engagement of women's organisations in **humanitarian work**, the volume of which, due to the challenges of the war, hindered their focus on strategic development for gender-transformative changes.

Feminist actions mentioned by interviewed experts and focus group participants align with the consistent and war-related feminist perspectives detailed in Section 5. The quantitative research data show a low level of involvement among participants in feminist organisations (16%). Participants of the quantitative survey most frequently mentioned informational campaigns and educational projects (82%), supporting women's groups and initiatives (79%) and engaging in activism and protests (56%). Such actions can be related to any thematic area within the feminist perspectives described in Section 5. Therefore, the level of implementation of certain feminist perspectives into specific feminist actions requires further research.

Recommendations from participants regarding ways and tools to enhance the influence of feminism on gender-transformative changes can also be considered a description of the most potentially effective feminist actions. Their recommendations can be grouped into three blocks: 1) raising awareness and promoting feminism, 2) integrating feminist perspectives into decision-making and 3) ensuring accountability and adherence to gender commitments. A comparison with the results of the empirical analysis in Section 6.1 shows that block 1 is quite fully implemented in feminist actions, whereas blocks 2 and 3 require more effort.

Conclusions

Russia's war against Ukraine since 2014 has created a favourable geopolitical context for feminist perspectives. However, the full-scale invasion in 2022 has had a contradictory impact on the opportunities for feminism to influence gender-transformative changes. Opposing tendencies coexist and conflict with each other, potentially leading to uncertain outcomes that heavily depend on the war's duration and eventual resolution.

The ongoing war presents a rapidly changing social landscape that poses challenges for feminist advocacy. **Topics requiring further research** include: women's political participation, particularly the challenges that displaced women may face in voting abroad; changes in the labour market, including the sustainability of women's entry into "traditionally male" professions and the potential deepening of the gender pay gap; the impact of neoliberal reforms on highly feminised sectors such as health care and education; the crisis of masculinity for men not fighting, including those avoiding mobilisation; concerns about potential conservative backlash and restrictions on women's reproductive rights; the exacerbation of feminised poverty, especially among vulnerable groups of women; and the diverse experiences of new societal groups such as refugees, internally displaced persons and residents on the frontlines or in occupied areas, all of which require further gender-responsive analysis.

The **key takeaways** of the research are as follows.

Windows of opportunity. European integration, international commitments and gender equality legislation create opportunities for progress in gender equality across various sectors. The war and ongoing crisis present new opportunities for women to enter traditionally male-dominated fields, encouraging flexibility in gender role distribution and driving the search for more adaptable solutions in response to changing circumstances.

Hindrances. Although attitudes towards feminism are more favourable among urban educated women, conservative views persist. Stereotypes and biases remain as fundamental barriers, with many perceiving gender inequality to be a non-urgent issue. Women are facing a double burden in "public" and "private" roles, and widespread prejudices against feminism, including associations with radical movements.

Levers and strategies. Humanitarian work with women can raise awareness of feminist issues. Emphasising European integration, international obligations and gender equality as European values – along with the role of anti-gender rhetoric in the ideology of the "Russian world" in communications with authorities and society – can serve as levers for gender-transformative change. Messages that resonate with the interests of a significant number of Ukrainian women, such as those related to unpaid care work, low pay in care sectors and direct discrimination in the labour market, should be prioritised. Feminism should evolve into a broader social justice movement.

Limitation of transformation and sensitive topics. The ongoing war, with its destruction and widespread power outages across Ukraine, severely hinders sustainable development and exhausts both the material and psychological resources of the population. The differences in experiences among various social groups create divisions, hindering mutual understanding and reform efforts. Even with a ceasefire, Ukraine remains under the threat of renewed aggression, requiring gender-responsive defence and reconstruction to avoid patriarchal militarisation. Sensitive topics such as domestic violence in military families and sexism within the armed forces need careful articulation.

Recommendations: main policy areas for feminist influence on gender-transformative changes:

1. Enhancing the role of women in decision-making and public policy.
2. Combating gender-based stereotypes and expanding educational efforts.
3. Supporting women's economic empowerment.
4. Addressing care work and infrastructure as a necessary component of economic empowerment and women's rights.
5. Ensuring gender-responsive recovery, post-war reconstruction and defence policies.
6. Addressing gender-based violence and legal protections.
7. Leveraging international partnerships for feminist policies.
8. Intersectionality and inclusivity: feminism as a comprehensive policy for change.
9. Providing necessary support for feminist organisations.