

Well intentioned but not well designed: Feminism in international development

Katharina Hopp

On 1 March, the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) unveiled its feminist development policy strategy. Parallel to this, the Federal Foreign Office presented its feminist foreign policy guidelines.

Focusing on gender equality

It is important to start by noting that the objectives of a feminist development policy are not completely new. It is already common practice in development cooperation to promote women and girls by taking account of gender equality (*gender mainstreaming*) in projects. Promoting LGBTQI+ human rights, one of the aims mentioned in the strategy, is not revolutionary either. During the previous legislative period, the two ministries already championed an inclusion strategy¹ for LGBTQI+ people, which was adopted in March 2021 by the Grand Coalition between the conservative CDU/CSU and the centre-left SPD. The BMZ is thus continuing the focus of the predecessor government under Angela Merkel. And it is right to do so. Promoting human rights should certainly be a priority topic for development cooperation. Yet it is questionable whether the feminist strategy is setting the right priorities.

The term 'feminism' is misleading

Promoting the rights of disadvantaged individuals – not least in accordance with the rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights – is undoubtedly one of the key goals of German development cooperation. However, the term 'feminism', which implies the promotion of women and girls, is not appropriate in this context and leads to misunderstandings, particularly in Germany's communication with its partner countries. Even more seriously, by treating dif-

ferent target groups as one, as envisaged by the strategy, there is a lack of focus on gender equality in development cooperation. This is vital to meet the specific needs of women and girls, however. Instead of placing the promotion of women and girls at the heart of the strategy, it targets the rights of all marginalised groups together under the term 'feminism'. That is well-intentioned, but in view of the reality in many countries almost impossible to implement. Moreover, on account of this broad-based definition of feminism, the share of projects actually still devoted to the rights of women and girls remains unclear.

Eurocentrism

There is no denying that the promotion of gender equality has been a key issue in German development cooperation for many years now. However, it is doubtful whether cooperation can be successful in culturally unfamiliar contexts if it pursues a strategy that adopts a Eurocentric perspective. Emphasising that 'gender' is based on a non-binary concept, for example – an idea that is presumably alien even to many people here in Germany – will not help local women's rights organisations in the Global South. In contrast to the widespread belief in Berlin, a commitment to women's and girls' rights does not necessarily equate with the promotion of LGBTQI+ rights. Moreover, women's rights activists in developing countries are already often discredited as being westernised. A feminist strategy will make their work even more difficult. In short, instead of pro-

viding guidance, the new strategy adopted by the BMZ means that local women's rights organisations supported as part of German development cooperation will be left even more open to attack. At the same time, it remains unclear as to how to deal with partner governments and civil society organisations that reject the BMZ's objectives. Despite its well-meaning intentions, the strategy risks being perceived as patronising in many developing countries. It therefore does not meet BMZ's own aspiration to ensure that development cooperation is a partnership between equals. The accusation of neo-colonialism plays into the hands of actors such as China and Russia in particular, who proudly emphasise that they do not interfere in the cultural affairs of their partner countries and are widely respected for that.

Funding secured?

For projects that promote gender equality as their primary objective, plans have been made to increase project funding from currently around 4 to 8 per cent. The BMZ's budget, which totals more than 12 billion euros this year, looks set to decrease drastically in 2024, however. The new strategy does not explain where funding will be cut in the future to finance the feminist approach. However, in view of increasing multiple crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which have had a particularly serious impact on women and girls and in many places have reversed the progress made in their development, it would be important to place gender equality at the heart of development policy. At the same time, implementation of a policy of this kind must be integrated into the specific context of each country.

1 The strategy is called the LGBTI Inclusion Strategy. In this article, we use the common abbreviation LGBTQI+, which stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and other identities.

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V.

Katharina Hopp

Advisor Development Policy
Analysis and Consulting

katharina.hopp@kas.de



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