

# Feminist Technology Diplomacy: An FFP Approach to Artificial Intelligence

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## Executive Summary

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has rapidly gained global momentum, with technological developments spurred on by generative AI and increased automation across military, medical, humanitarian, and educational domains, hastening the need to prioritise good international governance. To realise the gains whilst mitigating the risks of AI, robust governance frameworks are required to which feminist foreign policy (FFP) approaches are relevant. AI regulation that focuses on mitigating harms toward minoritised groups, particularly women, should be a critical priority for governments and international organisations. Failing to address these issues risks disenfranchising half the global population, ultimately leading to missed opportunities for gains in productivity and efficiency driven by AI advancements.

This paper presents the case for feminist technology diplomacy as a pathway to integrating gender and feminist perspectives into foreign policy approaches to AI. Firstly, we outline the current AI landscape and its implications for foreign policy domains. We go on to introduce the main principles guiding an intersectional feminist approach to AI, namely the prioritisation of fair, slow, consensual, and collaborative development. We compare this to the current global approaches to AI, some of which emphasise the importance of human-centric development, yet broadly fail to adequately consider the gendered opportunities and challenges of AI. We conclude by proposing international engagement through feminist technology diplomacy and share recommendations for regulatory bodies seeking an ethical, just, and equality-informed approach to AI in foreign policy.

## The AI Landscape

AI is broadly defined as technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem-solving, and 'intelligence' (Stanford University, 2020). Currently, only artificial narrow intelligence (ANI) systems are in use. These tools can autonomously perform specific tasks, often faster than humans, but are limited to their designated functions. Examples of ANI technologies include OpenAI's ChatGPT and Amazon's Alexa, but other applications abound across manufacturing and industries as diverse as health to human rights.

AI technology has been developing for decades. However, progress in recent years has supercharged AI capabilities and its use by individuals, organisations, and governments globally. There are several challenges that this rapidly expanding prevalence raises for foreign policy, including across international security and ethics domains. This includes deep civil-military entanglement, with many national security priorities reliant on civilian AI development, and much AI development led by only a few high-income countries (particularly the USA and China), exacerbating power asymmetries between these high-income nations and low to middle-income nations (Adebahr, 2024). Given the majority of AI talent resides in the private sector, this also constrains government's in-house capabilities and exposes governments to a reliance on international, private sector-led technologies that may be incongruous with both national interest and feminist principles (Csernatoni, 2024).

Moreover, security concerns have arisen regarding AI and the potential for a regulatory race to the bottom. The major players in the current AI landscape are the EU, the US, and China. While the EU has a first-mover advantage in regulatory expertise (e.g., the EU AI Act), the US is home to many of the leading and most influential private tech

companies. The US is largely adopting a laissez-faire approach to AI governance, allowing corporations to set their own standards. This is a direct result of the lobbying efforts of large technology corporations. In the first nine months of 2023, over 350 organisations reported lobbying the US federal government on matters pertaining to AI (Ratanpal, 2024). The US's AI governance approach can be characterised by a strong focus on restraining regulatory overreach, influenced by the domination of the private sector (Roberts et al., 2021). China, on the other hand, has a deployment advantage, with high user adoption of AI technologies—many of which are state-backed—and vast data resources. Scholars have expressed concerns about a burgeoning "arms race" between AI powers, where the competition to out-innovate may compromise the development of robust AI standards and safety regulations.

The field of AI ethics is also rapidly evolving, with key issues including aligning AI with human values, digital colonialism, the harms of biased AI technologies, and the impact of AI on climate change. Current literature on AI regulatory governance emphasizes the need to develop 'human-centric' AI (ITU, 2024; Center for Feminist Artificial Intelligence, 2022; Schopmans & Cupač, 2021). However, questions remain about which human values AI should align with and who determines these values. The skirmish to set AI's ideological agenda could therefore facilitate international cooperation on regulatory governance, for example between the EU and the US (Roberts et al., 2021), yet exclusionary alliances could also result in international backlash.

Digital colonialism is another pertinent challenge, referring to the extraction, analysis, and ownership of user data from developing nations by large tech companies, often with minimal benefit to those nations (Coleman, 2019). It also encompasses the dependent relationship that less technologically developed nations have with large companies or other nations that provide their technological infrastructure (Feijóo, 2020). Furthermore, the development of AI tools relies heavily on a vast "ghost" workforce (often women in developing nations) who perform tasks like data labelling, code cleaning, training machine learning models, and moderating and transcribing content (Wajcman & Young, 2023). These workers are frequently paid below minimum wage and have limited opportunities to advance their skills (Heaven, 2020). These extractive practices highlight the power asymmetries inherent in AI development, with data governance and ownership a broader issue and extraction of individuals' private data a long-running concern in terms of surveillance for objectionable political means (Königs, 2022).

Power asymmetries in AI contribute to the risk of exacerbating inequalities, such as gender inequality. The AI field is predominantly male dominated, with women representing only 20% of employees in technical roles at major machine learning companies, 12% of AI researchers, and 6% of professional software developers (O'Hagan, 2024). The use of biased or masculinised datasets to train AI technologies leads to outputs that reproduce or amplify the social prejudices embedded in the data. This issue is further compounded by the systematic exclusion of minoritized groups from the AI

industry, making it more than just an unfortunate by-product of biased data (Wajcman & Young, 2023). Moreover, AI technologies have been used to actively perpetrate gender-based violence (e.g., through deepfake pornography), or to unintentionally marginalise women, particularly women of colour (e.g., through facial recognition software disproportionately recognising white men over Black women (Ferl & Perras, 2024)). Power asymmetries also exist in terms of the mass displacement of parts of the labour force through automation. Although male-dominated industries have often been associated with automation (Ruppanner & Churchill 2023), some studies indicating that AI is more likely to replace jobs occupied by women than men, such as in legal and administrative fields where women are highly represented (Hatzius, et al. 2023).

Despite these challenges, feminist AI organisations remain optimistic about AI's potential (e.g., A+ Alliance, Civic AI Lab, FemAI). There are potential effective uses of AI in humanitarian affairs, including in streamlining humanitarian services (e.g. leaning on the AI efficiency savings in some of the more logistical, managerial domains of ODA delivery) and applying AI technologies to provide better services in conflict and disaster settings. For example, Project Jetson, developed by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, uses predictive analysis to forecast the movement(s) of displaced people in Somalia and provide more proactive allocation of resources to match population needs. It is important to note that projects like these are in trial stages and analysis of historical data should not be the only method to frame future action, particularly as this data has often been collected without local community engagement (Beduschi, 2022). Further, whilst AI is often criticised for its energy, water, and resource consumption, it also holds promise as a tool for addressing climate-related issues which is well-recognised to be a "threat multiplier" for gender inequality.

A feminist approach to AI therefore must consider both the challenges and opportunities that AI technologies create for gender equality in foreign policy, security, ethics, and humanitarian affairs. Given this, an FFP approach to AI is well-positioned to lend leading frameworks and principles to action.

## An intersectional feminist approach to AI

We define an intersectional feminist approach to AI as one that prioritises fairer, slower, more consensual and more collaborative development (Ulnicane & Aden, 2024). It is an approach reinforced by the United Nations and in opposition to the AI race dynamic (ITU 2024). We argue that common elements of an intersectional feminist approach to AI foreign policy include:

- **Acknowledgment that AI is gendered (and raced, etc.):** Whilst AI technologies are often depicted as 'objective' and technologists as 'neutral', emerging technologies are fundamentally cultural and shaped by their context.
- **Recognising that technology alone is not the solution:** Feminist approaches to AI reject 'technochauvinism' (otherwise known as 'techno-

solutionism') - the 'belief that technology is always the solution' (Broussard, 2018). On the contrary, there is compelling evidence that better technology alone will not solve critical social problems (Ulnicane & Aden 2023). Technology and social science must work together to address problems.

- **Reconciling that feminism is at odds with some kinds of AI use:** Whilst there is a multiplicity of feminist views and approaches, some strands of feminist thought fight vehemently for demilitarisation, with such strands often fundamentally at odds with military AI technologies and other technologies like predictive policing (Toupin 2024).
- **Taking a principled, not necessarily labelled, approach to AI:** There has been great debate within FFP communities on the value of foreign policy being *labelled* feminist as opposed to being feminist in substance (Lee-Koo 2020), a debate which is also playing out in AI. For example, whilst both EU and Spanish government publications both have explicit and implicit references to using AI to promote gender equality and advance the economic, social and political opportunities of minoritised groups, analysis found no mention of feminism or feminist throughout materials studied (Guevara-Gomez, et al 2021). A more open approach to including feminist or gendered concerns has been at times perceived as 'too political', with Poland for instance rejecting the European position on AI due to the mention of 'gender equality' (Schopmans & Cupać, 2021). Whilst a best practice approach might include an explicitly stated feminist lens and strong engagement with scholars of gender and technology, building AI policies that are feminist in substance is a vital first step.
- **Distinguishing bias as (often) intentional; correction must be proactive:** Biased datasets are a major issue impacting the likelihood of AI tools to produce biased outcomes. However, the onus must be on developers and the AI industry to diversify their teams, regulators, and build-in solutions. Bias is not always or even often an accidental by-product or technical error, but rather, a reinforcement of existing power relationships.
- **Moving beyond critique to practice:** The discussion around feminist AI has been robust and continues to grow. However, merely identifying issues is not enough; feminists should also focus on developing inherently feminist AI technologies. AI has significant potential for positive discrimination and remediation beyond just achieving 'fairness'. For example, the Feminist AI Research Network (f<A+i>r) is advancing feminist AI through a three-pronged approach: (1) funding and mentoring new AI creators, particularly women from underrepresented backgrounds, (2) establishing network hubs to strengthen partnerships among feminist AI researchers, and (3) promoting feminist AI through their Global Directory of A+ Alliance members (A+ Alliance, n.d.– a). To date, f<A+i>r has developed four prototypes and one pilot feminist AI technology. The first pilot project, AymurAI, created by the Argentinian team Data Género, 'measures gender-based violence in Latin

America to identify patterns leading to femicide' (Feldfeber et al., 2024).

Whilst an FFP approach is yet to be tangibly applied to AI in policy directives or regional convenings, many governments recognise the urgent need for better regulation and international collaboration on this issue. As such, it is a timely opportunity to apply principles in practice in the aim of developing more robust international cooperation, better international and domestic-facing policy, and commensurate action from industry across nations.

## Global approaches to AI

Globally, 85% of the 193 Member States of the United Nations International Telecommunication Union (ITU) have not put in place regulation or policies around AI (ITU 2024). Out of the nations who have committed to an FFP approach or are members of the FFP+ Group, none yet have official AI regulation in place, aside from those covered by the EU AI Act (as of August 2024). Three countries—Chile (Chilean AI Policy 2021-203), Rwanda (National Artificial Intelligence Policy for the Republic of Rwanda), and Canada (Artificial Intelligence and Data Act)—have AI policies, with Chile and Canada introducing proposed bills to regulate AI at the federal level.

Analysis of these nations' most recent official AI National Plans, Strategies, or Visions (as of August 2024, including only those public and in English or translation) reveals that only Chile and the Netherlands explicitly mention gender. Notably, the Chilean AI Policy (translated from Spanish to English) includes a section (3.6) dedicated to gender, titled "Género," within Axis 3: Ethics, Legal and Regulatory Aspects, and Socioeconomic Impacts. Objectives 3.6.1 and 3.6.2 specifically aim to promote the participation of women in the AI industry and in AI adoption, while Objective 3.6.3 focuses on promoting gender equity in the implementation of AI systems. None of the nations committed to an FFP approach have explicitly committed to a feminist AI approach in their AI strategies, plans, or policy documents.

Broader feminist analyses of AI stances are in nascent stages. The EU and Spanish approaches to AI are among those that have been analysed for through a gender lens. As per Guevara-Gomez et al's (2021) analysis, the EU has focused their efforts on 'human-centric' and 'inclusive' AI for Europe. Policy documents make references to how AI can improve human welfare and freedom, facilitate the SDGS "such as promoting gender balance" and foster equality. In an analysis of Spain's approach to AI, three quarters of documents examined included specific references to gender, for instance in "addressing major social challenges such as the gender gap". The EU approach calls for obligations to use datasets that are representative of "relevant dimensions of gender, ethnicity and other possible grounds of prohibited discrimination". They plan to promote measures to reduce the gender gap in STEM and audit AI systems to allow identification of illegal outcomes or harmful consequences generated by these systems. Spain by comparison explicitly aims to design algorithms to avoid gender bias.



Both – and nations well beyond the two studied – could assume a more openly feminist approach to AI, increase the number of explicit references to gender in documents and reports, and incorporate the perspectives of more scholars in gender and technology. Additionally, despite aspirations to create more inclusive, unbiased tech, such moves are undermined by the staggering underrepresentation of minoritised groups in the sector, particularly in the global tech industry. As such, states have an essential role to play in advocating for and advancing the position of women and other underrepresented groups within the private technology sector.

Beyond feminist or gender-mainstreamed approaches to AI, Feijoo et al. (2020) argue that AI development and deployment risks fragmenting world regions, with technological nationalism, protectionism and dysfunctional fragmentation potentially undermining the balance between diversity and innovation in AI. Technological nationalism refers to nations developing their tech ecosystem ‘in house’. This can be challenging for regulators, as solutions developed independently do not always meet international standards (such as promoting gender equality or, at the very least, mitigating gendered harms), and there may be a retaliation to protectionism to compensate for lack of opportunities in closed markets – ‘rogue AI’. As such, a widening gap may emerge between the ‘have and have nots’ in AI (Adigwe et al., 2024). This has implications on when and where gender is prioritised in AI development and regulation, with such gendered regulation not on the radar for several states and jurisdictions (e.g. nations who are yet to regulate AI), pushed back in others (for instance, Poland), considered in some (like EU, Spain and Chile), and recognised, but without resourcing, in many (to date, Australia for instance). A global champion of feminist AI is yet to emerge. Furthermore, digital fragmentation caused by countries and companies developing divergent (and potentially incompatible) technology standards could stifle progress and potentially exacerbate the risk of cybercrime (Miebach, 2024).

On the other hand, Feijoo et al. (2020) note that some level of fragmentation in terms of development could enrich the global AI ecosystem to stimulate innovation, introducing competitive checks and balances through decentralisation of development. Rather than being a natural result of fragmentation however, it would rely on ‘new technology diplomacy’ – a renewed kind of international engagement aimed at transcending narrow national interests to shape a global set of principles. Ideally, this would require a critical mass of countries with a range of actors on board – foreign policy diplomats, private sector stakeholders, academics and researchers, civil society – and go beyond formal multi-lateral institutions and instruments like treaties. The literature highlights international cooperation as an essential feature underpinning the success of future AI regulatory frameworks (e.g. Adigwe et al., 2024; Erkkilä, 2023; Roberts et al., 2021). Furthermore, rather than stifling innovation in the AI sector, regulation has the potential to incentivise AI actors to branch out into more socially responsible areas as opposed to those that maximise profits. For example, in conservation, humanitarian aid and bias mitigation.

There are already a few actors in this space, including UNESCO’s Global AI Ethics and Governance Observatory, the World Economic Forum’s AI Governance Alliance, and Partnership on AI’s Global Task Force for Inclusive AI, to name a few. Once again, an international feminist champion is yet to emerge in this space, with industry bodies such as UNESCO, the OECD and the WEF unlikely to explicitly align with an FFP approach. However, international efforts to establish principles for trustworthy AI, such as the OECD AI Principles, generally align with FFP values. Indeed, despite there being no explicit mention of gender, the OECD’s value-based AI Principles advocate for: (1) inclusive growth, sustainable development and well-being; (2) human rights and democratic values, including fairness and privacy; (3) transparency and explainability; (4) robustness, security and safety, and; (5) accountability. Yet, without a central focus on the gendered opportunities and challenges of AI, such efforts risk overshadowing gender in relation to other ethical considerations. Further, such forums may not be the right instrument to effectively engage stakeholders, specifically around feminist concerns – whilst it is critical that such forums mainstream gender, an explicitly feminist-centred space would also help move the research, policy development and advocacy forward on this specific issue. This approach of ‘new technology diplomacy’ is therefore more of a foundation for FFP practitioners to build upon, rather than the complete answer.

## Feminist technology diplomacy and the path forward for an FFP approach to AI

‘Feminist technology diplomacy’, as such, may provide a way forward in terms of mainstreaming gender and feminist approaches to AI and foreign policy. While similar to new technology diplomacy in its prioritisation of international engagement, feminist technology diplomacy should more directly incorporate feminist civil society, academics, bureaucrats and technologists to advance regulation, policy development, and tangible supports for nations and industry alike to develop feminist AI tech in nature, strategy and use. Utilising Orlikowski and Gash’s (1994) taxonomy of technology through a socio-technological lens, the ‘nature’ of technology refers to the type of AI (this could also include who and how the technology is developed), the ‘strategy’ of technology refers to why AI is used (to what ends), and the ‘use’ of technology refers to how AI is used (in what contexts, for what purposes, with what outcomes). Drawing from feminist analyses of the EU AI Act (e.g. Center for Feminist Artificial Intelligence, 2022) and surrounding global literature (e.g. A+ Alliance, n.d.– b; Beduschi, 2022; ITU, 2024; Ulicane & Aden, 2023; Wajcman & Young, 2023; Wudel, 2023), we argue that the following be adopted by Australia and by other governments seeking an ethical, just and equality-informed approach to AI in foreign policy:

1. **Government should mainstream gender throughout its domestic and international approaches to AI** – and mainstream AI in its gender policies. In Australia, this includes ensuring actions relating to AI and emerging technologies are embedded in DFAT’s International Gender Equality Strategy and the Office for Women’s (OFW) National

- Gender Equality Strategy. The Australian Government should also ensure any AI specific regulation and policy is gendered (E.g. AI Ethics Principles, relevant frameworks for generative AI, etc. drawing on the eSafety Commissioners work where relevant). The Chilean AI policy provides an example of gender mainstreaming in AI policy that international actors could build on.
2. **The approach to mitigating gendered harms, embedding ethics, and addressing biased inputs and outcomes, should be made mandatory in policy and legislation** – not voluntary. An approach to mitigating harms must recognise the pushback and backlash evidenced against gender equality and feminist approaches to AI and be strategic about rallying supporters and countering anti-feminist interference.
  3. **International AI development demands a proactive approach that aligns innovation with regulation**, rather than setting them in opposition. This approach acknowledges that progress in areas like gender equality is often driven by regulatory intervention. Grounding technological developments in an intersectional, intergenerational approach to AI is essential given the long-term impacts AI has in ‘locking in’ current day values and practices (MacAskill, 2022).
  4. **Global champions for feminist AI are needed.** Global feminist and gender equality norm entrepreneurs (e.g. FFP+ Group), including the Australian Government, should lean on their considerable track record in advocating for gender equality internationally and provide policy and normative advocacy around the nature, strategy and use of AI.
  5. **Strong multi-lateral approaches to AI are needed**, including major players in terms of global policy and norm entrepreneurs alongside tech powerhouses and users of tech (addressing power asymmetries where possible), to ensure a relatively consistent approach to AI development globally with consistent standards.
  6. **Invest in interoperable gendered principles for AI** that can be beneficial for other fast growing tech domains and can be useable across civil and military organisations and applications.
  7. **More investment in research** is needed to better understand the gendered nature of AI and its implications for foreign policy. This includes increasing foreign policy literacy in AI from a gendered lens, investing in research, providing training where needed and support for explicit gender and tech advisors in government.
  8. **Dedicated resources and attention should be directed to proactive uses for AI in reducing discrimination and eliminating inequality and bias**, including funding gendered tech-for-good applications beneficial to societies and foreign policy. For instance, this could be funded through overseas development assistance or public diplomacy initiatives, or through private-public startup investments that focus on gender and AI and its application in disaster or conflict settings, for instance.
  9. **In roll-out of AI technologies in humanitarian settings, participatory design with local communities should be mandated** to design effective and ethical AI systems used in humanitarian preparedness models.
  10. **Gender mainstreaming is required in data protection policies**, given that women and gender diverse people face unique online challenges related to privacy, such as harassment and targeted privacy breaches. This is imperative as AI technologies, such as deepfake production, increasingly impact women’s online safety.
  11. **Both public and private sectors, including education pathways, need to invest increasing women’s participation in the AI industry.** Without investing in women and minoritised groups’ representation in the sector, states’ abilities to fulfil some of the above recommendations will be severely hampered.
- The scalability of these recommendations is something yet to be tested and relies on both building a more representative workforce and challenging current power structures that inhibit women and minoritised groups’ ownership, and influence, of the future of AI. Given power asymmetries in the international system – between genders, states, and sectors, for instance – it is worth asking how states can push back for more ethical, intersectional AI.
- Ultimately, an FFP approach to AI will require a human-centred strategy that avoids techno-solutionism and instead integrates a balanced social-technological perspective into AI development. AI powered tools and mechanisms have enormous potential for many foreign policy, humanitarian, global ethics and international security uses. However, mainstreaming feminist and gender-responsive approaches is critical, ensuring nuanced engagement with local communities is more likely to yield impactful results, and a holistic approach to recognising power asymmetries in technology is critical to balancing the gendered foreign policy risks of AI at a global competitive level.
- It is worth asking, can Australia be the global champion of feminist AI that we need?

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## THE AUSTRALIAN FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY COALITION

The Australian Feminist Foreign Policy Coalition is diverse network advancing feminist foreign policy in Australia. Convened by IWDA, its members work across a range of sectors including foreign policy, defence, security, women's rights, climate change and migration.

Feminist foreign policy is a framework to understand and transform the global systems of power which uphold and perpetuate inequality – including patriarchy, colonialism, capitalism, racism and others – in order to create peaceful and flourishing societies. This Issues Paper Series aims to explore the opportunities and challenges for Australia in applying a feminist lens to a range of foreign policy issues, and provide practical ways forward.