

What Does it Mean to Build Feminist Futures?

An Invitation to Contribute to this Dialogue

Written by Rebecca Tiessen, April 9, 2026

The desire to build feminist futures has a long history of more than 50 years with advocates in the early 1970s demanding that ‘the future is female’. In the past 20 years, a growing and diversified commitment to promoting feminist futures can be found across scholarly, practitioner, philosophical, and even popular culture sources including the blockbuster film ‘Barbie’ in which a feminist utopia is celebrated and patriarchal norms are criticized.

IWDA (International Women’s Development Agency), in 2021, cohosted a panel at the NGO 65th Commission on the Status of Women titled “Imagining and building Feminist Futures after COVID-19” and subsequently created a video on what #afeministfuturelookslike. You can view the video here: <https://iwda.org.au/a-feminist-future/>

The commitment to building feminist futures therefore has a long trajectory but the strategy to achieve feminist futures has been less clear. How do we get there? How do we build feminist futures and ensure we are creating the pathways needed to achieve a feminist vision, and what exactly do we mean by a feminist vision?

Over the past decade, we have invested a lot of our time and energy in discussions of feminist policies to guide a largely unarticulated vision (as well as lots of valuable critiques of the limitations of policies for achieving the feminist futures we aspire to).

Feminist policies are certainly crucial to the foundation of building feminist futures but as we have seen, they lack staying power (including the demise of FFP in Sweden and more recently and perhaps inadvertently, in Canada, and the general decline of discussions around FFP globally). When feminist policies are tied to the government of the day, they are subject to changing political and economic circumstances that ensure their precarity. They may be considered ‘good to have’ but not necessary and when the tyranny of the urgent (economic growth or facing economic weaponization, increased security concerns and more) shape the

priorities of the day, we see feminist commitments (even when not called explicitly feminist), quickly fall by the wayside. We need to address this reality head-on and ensure that feminist policies – policies that are linked to feminist commitments – have staying power.

How we do this (ensure the longevity of feminist policies) is the focus of the latter part of this paper. First, it is important to explain what I mean by feminist policies and feminist commitments? There are three main components of what I mean by feminist: 1. Diverse and equitable representation and participation, including the valuing of voices and knowledge and a commitment to inclusion and inclusive practices to ensure diverse representation (EDI) in all spaces; 2. Making connections between the injustices that people face and the systemic and structural realities that perpetuate them, and through these connections, formulating systemic-level changes that transform practices, and 3. An ethics of care that centres people and planet over profit and power.

Feminist futures therefore: centre an ethics of care in all priorities, care that can be observed through increased commitments to peace and to ending violence; prioritize just systems and processes that lead to the end of discrimination; and ensure environmental sustainability, planetary health, and sustainable livelihoods so that families and communities achieve economic wellbeing. These priorities are summarized as peace, justice, and sustainable economies. There are, of course, more priorities that are central to building feminist futures and these include laying the foundations for building peace, advancing justice, and promoting sustainable economies and they begin with commitments to mental and physical wellbeing, improved social relationships, valuing purpose and meaning in life, and alignment with our values.

The spirit of building feminist futures is grounded in rich insight and critical analysis offered across feminist scholarship and in the practical solutions including investments in programming (such as funding) and in feminist-focussed organizations that continue to champion feminist priorities. There have been extraordinary advances in practical feminist solutions to a largely anti-feminist world with a range of innovations and impacts that are worthy of celebration. We can see the impacts of feminist leadership in women's rights organizations that address feminist priorities on a daily basis, and we can also see impacts of feminist leadership in governments through inside activism and persistent prioritization of feminist goals, even if the policy of the day has changed.

These valuable investments will, to some extent, persist even in the most difficult times of gender backlash. Feminist leaders are empowered by their growing communities of support and will continue to support the feminist priorities that lead to the justice-oriented changes they seek to address in their communities.

However, there are warranted concerns and real threats beyond the anecdotes of feminist leadership because the landscape is changing rapidly. These changes can be observed in the demise of women's equality priorities and EDI in USA, growing authoritarianism and democratic backsliding, economic weaponization, increased militarization, and more, and with these changes we see a rise in anti-gender backlash.

With our priorities and goals of a building feminist futures of peace, justice and sustainable economies we do so with the deep structural, systemic and persistent patriarchal challenges noted above in mind. The challenges require ongoing work to identify, name, confront, navigate (especially since tackling these challenges is a long-term reality and resilience in the moment can be a powerful temporary priority), and ultimately to overcome.

In addition to our ongoing knowledge and focus on the structural and systemic challenges, we also need to focus on building the foundations for – and pathways to - feminist futures. Policies can help guide the design of feminist priorities but since they often lack the longevity needed to build feminist futures, we need to expand our strategies and reflect more fully on what is at the heart of - or the foundation for - building feminist futures. One of the core components of the foundation is leadership, innovation, and training of the next generation of change-makers. Focussing on leadership training for feminist futures requires diverse commitments including:

1. New curriculum and training resources adopted in academic and training centres;
2. New skills that ensure research and data collection that support feminist futures; and
3. New communication strategies to ensure knowledge is shared with the largest audience possible to have the biggest impact.

Feminist scholarship has helped to centre and analyse these feminist priorities and here we draw on feminist ethics of care (Robinson, Thomson, Ruddick, Gilligan, and more); feminist flourishing (Donkoh, Swan, and Tiessen, 2025); feminist empowerment (Kabeer, Cornwall, Batliwala, Mohanty); and many more powerful analytical insights.

Feminist agentic approaches are situated within - and balanced with - feminist international relations and gender and development scholarship that connects the agency-focussed priorities with the realist tensions of the world we live in – the systemic and structural inequalities that perpetuate poverty, violence, climate change, and more. As Mark Carney reminded us in the

2026 WEF speech in Davos, we need to “take on the world as it is, not wait around for a world we wish it to be” but the meaning of this quote varies depending on how we interpret it and where we put our emphasis. The idea of building feminist futures demands that we acknowledge the world we live in now and that we cannot wait for a world we wish it to be. Putting the emphasis on this last part of the sentence provides a new lens for pursuing a commitment to feminist futures as it recognizes that we must be pro-active in the building of feminist futures since futures are shaped by planning and strategizing.

What does building feminist futures mean to you? In a spirit of democratic, feminist knowledge-sharing, and pluriversality, we invite you to share your reflections.

Contributions could address:

1. The imperative for building a feminist future and the backdrop for which feminist futures are crucial (the alarming impacts of anti-gender backlash, marginalization of EDI priorities, growing xenophobia, racism, authoritarianism and more);
2. Stories of impact and hope that highlight the kind of feminist practice that is possible, examples of impact and change that help lay the foundation of what feminist leadership can look like and the changes it can provide. As we strategize for a feminist future of peace, justice and sustainable economies, we also need to document some of the successes and outcomes that we can scale up, learn from, and advance; and
3. New possibilities, opportunities, strategies, training and learning innovations, and transformative visions. In our pathway to building feminist futures what do we need to invest in, how do we need to do it, what do we need to keep in mind?

We invite you to share your reflections on any of these three areas of focus as part of our building feminist futures series.

Submission guidelines:

1. Submissions can be in a variety of formats: short essays, blog, case studies, poems and more or as videos submissions (reciting a poem or story), animated video stories, etc.

2. Length: written submissions should be between 500 – 1500 words and video submissions should be no longer than 5 minutes (we ask you to share a transcript of any video or other non-written submissions)
3. Submissions can be in French or in English
4. Send your submissions to rtiessen@uottawa.ca

We will feature successful submissions in our inaugural blog+ series on the [BuildingFeministFutures](#) website.