

Dismantling or Reinforcing Power Structures?

An Analysis of the Transformative Potential of Spain's Feminist Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, Arancha González Laya, the former Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, announced Spain's adoption of a feminist foreign policy (FFP), following Sweden's pioneering implementation of this strategy in 2014. This trend has continued, with thirteen other nations also adopting feminist approaches to foreign policy. Due to the undefined nature of FFP, previous research has mainly relied on cross-country analysis to create a theoretical framework grounded in feminist international relations theories and ethics of care. This research employs discourse analysis to examine Spain as a case study, using data from its FFP policy documents and supplementary materials such as news coverage, press releases, and official videos from the Spanish government. This thesis contributes to the scholarly literature on FFP by exploring its transformative potential, analysing both its feminist theoretical foundations and how its implementation impacts the reinforcement or disruption of dominant global hierarchies. My findings reveal that Spain's FFP is primarily guided by liberal feminist principles and fails to incorporate a postcolonial feminist viewpoint, which ultimately perpetuates power imbalances. I also demonstrate that Spain uses its progress in domestic feminist policies to position itself as a norm entrepreneur for gender equality to enhance its relevance and leadership on the international stage. Finally, I show that Spain elevates its ranking in the temporal hierarchy of FFP to advance its preferred hegemonic feminisation, potentially undermining alternative feminist policymaking in the Global South and thus contributing to maintaining, reinforcing, and even creating structures of inequality.

Keywords: Feminist Foreign Policy, Spain, Norm entrepreneurship, Gender Mainstreaming, Hegemonic Feminisation, Gendered Global Hierarchies

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
CFFP	Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
EU	European Union
FFP	Feminist Foreign Policy
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
GAPS	Gender Action for Peace and Security
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
ICAN	International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons
IR	International Relations
LBTI	Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer, Asexual
MAUC	Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
PEIEMH	Plan for the Effective Equality of Women and Men
PSOE	Spanish Socialist Workers' Party
RTVE	Spanish Radio and Television Corporation
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
TPNW	Treaty on the Prohibition of nuclear weapons
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
WILPF	Women's International League for Peace and Freedom
WPR	What's the Problem

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	3
List of Abbreviations	4
Introduction	6
Chapter 1. Theoretical Framework.....	10
1.1 Feminist Foreign Policy	10
1.2 Norm Entrepreneurship	11
1.3 Hegemonic Feminisation and Gendered Global Hierarchies	13
Chapter 2. A Conceptualization of Spain’s Feminist Foreign Policy.....	15
2.1. Analysing the Nature of the Problem in the FFP.....	16
2.1.1. Spain’s Understanding of Structural Gender Inequality.....	16
2.1.2. The Limitations of the Spanish FFP: a One-size-fits-all Approach	18
2.2. Strategic Initiatives for a Feminist Foreign Policy	20
2.2.1. Gender Mainstreaming	20
2.2.2. International Cooperation	21
2.3. Conclusion	22
Chapter 3. Spain’s Role as a Norm Entrepreneur.....	24
3.1. Assuming Leadership in Gender Equality.....	25
3.2. Domestic Policies and Politics as Legitimation Techniques	27
3.3. Seizing the Opportunity: Spain’s Potential for Global Leadership in FFP	29
3.4. Conclusion	30
Chapter 4. The Impact of Spain’s FFP on Global Hierarchies and Structural Inequalities	31
4.1. Multilateral Feminism: An Approach of Solidarity and Cooperation.....	32
4.2. Reinforcing Dominant Global Hierarchies.....	34
4.3. Conclusion	37
Conclusion.....	38
References	40

INTRODUCTION

As global politics continues to be dominated by traditional power dynamics, many states have adopted Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) as an innovative attempt to reimagine the existing world order and challenge the conventional foreign policy systems rooted in racism, colonialism, patriarchy, and male dominance (Thompson, Ahmed & Khokhar, 2021).¹ Many scholars, activists and civil society organisations (CSOs) argue that FFP prioritises gender equality, peace, and human rights through the dismantlement of these pervasive power structures that uphold systemic inequalities and discrimination against women and girls² (Thompson, Patel, Kripke, O'Donnell, 2020). Yet, considering that this approach is developed within a male-dominated world—constructed through male-centric narratives, paradigms and voices—, can FFP dismantle entrenched patriarchal systems from within the very framework it seeks to transform?

Sweden's adoption of a FFP in 2014 inspired many other countries to incorporate feminist perspectives into their foreign and security policies. In total, fifteen new countries have now officially implemented a FFP. Coinciding with the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the 20th anniversary of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, Arancha González Laya, the former Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation (MAUC), announced in 2020 that Spain would also join the growing trend of states with a FFP (MAUC, 2021, p. 4). In this thesis, I will examine Spain's implementation of a FFP to uncover its underlying feminist theoretical foundations and explore the purposes and implications of adopting this approach.

The multiple perspectives on feminist foreign policy result, among other factors, from the conceptual and practical abstraction of the approach. This results in different ways of understanding *how* to implement a FFP, leading to a myriad of questions: How does a state pursue a FFP? What differentiates a feminist state from other, non-feminist,

¹ This thesis used the AI Generator ChatGPT to check spelling and grammar, and refine sentence structures.

² FFPs are not exclusively concerned with women and girls; many also incorporate other marginalized groups into their focus. The Netherlands, for instance, gives particular attention to LGBTQIA+ individuals and their rights. For clarity and brevity, I will use “women” or “women and girls” in this analysis but recognise that this terminology also encompasses other vulnerable groups targeted by the policy.

states? Can there be such a thing as a “feminist state”? Because there is no widespread agreement on this issue, primarily because of the undefined nature of FFP, many academics have examined the FFPs adopted by different countries to identify their underlying theoretical frameworks, informed by different strands of feminist theory—such as liberal, intersectional, postcolonial and radical feminism—and to examine the distinct outcomes and limitations associated with each country’s policy. This has led to extensive work on cross-country research that has contributed to developing a theoretical framework for understanding feminist foreign policy through feminist international relations (IR) and (critical) (feminist) ethics of care (Aggestam et al., 2019; Robinson, 2021). Previous research has also focused primarily on the case of Sweden and its particular policy document, as it was the first country to create, implement, and even withdraw the FFP. Scholars have concentrated on examining the various feminist theories underpinning Swedish FFP and assessing its transformative potential (Nylund, & Bjarnegård, 2023), contingent on the specific feminist frameworks it incorporates.

Despite excellent work on the theoretical foundations of FFPs, there is a notable gap in understanding the motivations driving different countries’ adoption of a feminist foreign policy, and how their distinct implementation strategies impact their own transformative efforts. Addressing this gap is essential for several reasons: (1) it strengthens the academic framework underpinning feminist foreign policies by closely examining different feminist theories and their practical implications; (2) it offers valuable insights into the underlying reasons behind states’ adoption of a FFP, thus advancing our understanding of the broader trend of FFP states; and (3) it informs us of the development of more effective action plans for FFP that prioritises both meaningful structural transformation and the successful implementation of gender equality policies. The latter point is especially relevant due to feminist scholars’ criticism of feminist policies enacted from “state-centered institutional frameworks” (Aggestam & True, 2020, p. 147). These scholars argue that states are embedded with patriarchal, colonial and hierarchical power structures that perpetuate the very systems of oppression that FFP states seek to dismantle, thereby limiting their potential for transformative change (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018; Parashar et al., 2018).

This thesis examines and contributes to the existing body of literature on the transformative abilities of states with FFPs. To fill the current academic gap identified in the previous paragraph, I will focus on Spain—a widely under-researched FFP

country—as a case study. In addition to analysing the theoretical feminist underpinnings of the Spanish FFP, I will assess the underlying purposes of Spain’s adoption of a FFP, as well as whether its pursuit of a feminist diplomacy contributes to meaningful change or maintains already established systems of oppression for women and girls. In light of the above discussion, this research intends to respond to the following research question: *How does Spain’s feminist foreign policy contribute to or challenge existing structural gender inequalities and power imbalances to achieve its transformative potential from 2020 until now?* Following the central question of the thesis, I have also formulated three sub-questions that serve to structure the analytical chapters: (1) *what* are the feminist theoretical underpinnings that inform the Spanish FFP?; (2) *why* has Spain adopted a FFP?; and (3) *how* does Spain pursue its FFP and position itself in the international sphere?

This research project employs qualitative methodology to analyse the Spanish feminist foreign policy as a case study. Because FFP is concerned with addressing power imbalances and structural inequities, I use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to reveal how language, operating as a form of social practice, is connected to power relations and inequality (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000). CDA takes into account how language and discourse shape, reinforce or challenge the power dynamics inherent in a specific context (Janks, 1997), making it crucial for uncovering the underlying assumptions that inform Spain’s specific approach to FFP. For the policy analysis, I also utilise Bacchi’s (1999) “What’s the problem?” (WPR) framework, a deconstructionist approach that analyses how policy issues are constructed through language, arguing that “we need to shift our analysis from policies as attempted ‘solutions’ to ‘problems,’ to policies as constituting competing interpretations or representations of political issues” (Bacchi, 1999, p. 2). Hence, this thesis does not seek to analyse the impact and effectiveness of the Spanish FFP in practice, but rather to investigate how the Spanish FFP is framed and represented through discourse, focusing on the conceptual underpinnings and narrative strategies that influence its development. The data generated for this thesis is sourced from two main FFP policy documents in Spain: “Spain’s Feminist Foreign Policy: Promoting Gender Equality in Spain’s External Action” and “Action Plan for a Feminist Foreign Policy 2023-2024”. Moreover, I employ data from the Spanish government’s press releases, news media and video materials from 2020 until April 2024 to address how and why has Spain adopted a FFP.

This thesis is composed of four chapters. In the first chapter, I examine the theoretical framework on feminist foreign policy and the debate around the transformative potential of FFP through different feminist theories. Here I also use the literature on “norm entrepreneurship” as discussed by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) and applied to FFP by Sundström and Elgström (2020) that I will later use to explain why Spain has decided to pursue a feminist approach to foreign policy. To explain how Spain’s FFP challenges or reinforces power imbalances, I review the concept of “hegemonic feminisation” introduced by Zhukova (2023) and Thomson’s (2022) work on gendered global hierarchies. In Chapter 2, I answer the first sub-question through the analysis of Spain’s FFP documents. I apply liberal, intersectional and postcolonial feminist theories to understand how Spain frames gender equality policies and evaluate the transformative potential of the policy from its theoretical foundations. In Chapter 3, I answer the second sub-question by examining why Spain has adopted the role of a norm entrepreneurship. I argue that Spain’s FFP serves to advance its leadership, relevancy and soft power in international politics. Moreover, I contend that Spain claims this higher position through its domestic progress and the opportunity presented by Sweden’s withdrawal from its FFP. The last chapter answers the third sub-question. I argue that Spain’s FFP has a strong focus on international cooperation and solidarity but its disregard for a postcolonial analysis to its FFP contributes to maintaining, reinforcing and creating dominant global hierarchies, especially between the Global North and the Global South. This thesis finds that Spain’s FFP is framed within an increasing trend of FFP states that seek to dismantle patriarchal and colonial hierarchies. However, Spain’s FFP demonstrates significant limitations in its transformative potential. This is primarily due to its persistent neglect of postcolonial theoretical frameworks and its foundational reliance on liberal feminist principles. Consequently, Spain’s FFP reinforces existing power imbalances that the FFP framework aims to address.

CHAPTER 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I engage with the existing theoretical framework on FFP to identify theoretical avenues for analysing Spain's FFP. First, I provide a comprehensive overview of the theoretical discourse on FFP, focusing on its distinct feminist underpinnings and their influence on the transformative capacity of FFP. After introducing the main theoretical debate of this thesis, I discuss the role of states as norm entrepreneurs in shaping the global political agenda and gaining relevance on the international stage. Finally, I examine Zhukova's (2023) concept of "hegemonic feminisation" to understand whether FFPs effectively disrupt global power structures or perpetuate the status quo. Throughout this chapter, I pay special attention to the postcolonial critique on FFP to later scrutinise the limitations of Spain's FFP and explore the potential avenues for more inclusive and equitable feminist approaches to foreign policy.

1.1 FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

Since Sweden's adoption of a FFP in 2014, fifteen countries have officially established their own FFPs, and several others have expressed a desire to adopt a similar policy or at least to introduce more comprehensive gender equality policies. In spite of some countries' shift toward FFP, there is limited scholarship on the gendered dynamics of foreign policy (Aggestam & True, 2024, Thomson, 2022). For this reason, foreign policy analysis (FPA) has remained a gender-blind area of research until recently, when scholars have started to formulate a theoretical framework that builds on both feminist IR theory and FPA (Aggestam & True, 2020). The primary cause for the lack of integration between these two fields of research is feminist scholars' critique of state-centred institutional frameworks for gender equality policies. According to feminist scholarship, the inherent patriarchal and oppressive power structures within states prevent them from effectively promoting feminist ethical goals (Aggestam et al., 2019, p. 27).

The absence of a feminist approach to FPA has resulted in no global consensus on the precise definition of FFP. Consequently, countries have created their FFPs based on their own interpretation of the problem to resolve through the new gender equality policy and their idea of the feminist principles needed to tackle it (Thomson, 2022, p.

4), often incorporating only women and gender considerations into their analysis and practice (Thomson & Clement, 2019, p. 1). However, scholars and CSOs agree that FFP and gender mainstreaming must go beyond the “add-women-and-stir” approach, which leads to a “shallow understanding that focuses on adding women into existing structures” instead of challenging them (Chappell & Guerrina, 2020, p. 261). They believe that addressing power imbalances, structural inequalities and discrimination, violence within the same system is essential for FFP to achieve its transformative goals (Aggestam et al., 2019, p. 27; Thompson & Clement, 2018, p. 76).

At the heart of the debate on FFP is the question of its transformative potential. Scholars have noted that numerous FFPs—such as the Swedish, French, Canadian and Mexican FFPs—are mainly rooted in mainstream liberal feminism, focusing on representation, equality, rights and market, each factor to a different degree, which raises questions about whether FFP is transformative or merely incorporating women into established frameworks and institutions (Ünlü, 2020, p. 92; Zhukova, et al., 2022, p. 195). Robinson (2021) argues that a liberal cosmopolitan approach to FFP does not offer a transformative and radical approach but rather “reproduces existing relations of power, including gender power relations and Western liberal modes of domination” (p. 20). Critical scholarship claims that incorporating a postcolonial and intersectional perspective is essential for FFP to achieve structural transformation (Achilleos-Sarll, et al., 2023; Achilleos-Sarll, 2018; Thomson, 2022; Zhukova et al., 2022). For instance, Achilleos-Sarll (2018) believes that liberal feminism offers “an integrative rather than transformative approach to foreign policy” (p. 44) and advances postcolonial feminism to expose the gendered, sexualised and racialised discourses and hierarchies which characterise so much of the discourse and practice of foreign policy” (p. 46). CSOs also demand a more radical approach to FFP (Achilleos-Sarll, et al., 2023). Nonetheless, some scholars have maintained that, despite its limitations, FFP is a valuable approach for disrupting power hierarchies and imbalances and has therefore the potential to be transformative (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; Bouka, 2021).

1.2 NORM ENTREPRENEURSHIP

For a norm—or a set of norms—to emerge, Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) argue that norm entrepreneurs are crucial in framing an issue or idea as significant and requiring attention. These norm entrepreneurs, whether state or non-state, put forward

certain “standards of appropriateness” which often clash with the established normative system (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 897). It is through ideas of empathy, commitment and progress that norm entrepreneurs are able to persuade other actors to adhere to the new norm, thus creating a network of actors that collectively support and propagate this newly established standard, reinforcing its legitimacy and ensuring its broader acceptance, a process of the norm life cycle also known as “norm cascade” (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 898). Sundström and Elgström (2020) have argued that Sweden’s adoption of a FFP demonstrates its role as a norm entrepreneur. By setting a new code of appropriate behaviour based on the advancement of gender equality, Sweden is able to act as an “agent of social change” (Björkdahl, 2002, p. 45) that challenges the established racist and patriarchal status quo (Wunderlich, 2013).

Even though norm entrepreneurs are driven by their sense of moral commitment, empathy, cooperation and integrity (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998; Ingebritsen, 2002; Stamnes, 2020, p. 540), many of these actors also align with a new set of norms for strategic motives, whether they serve domestic or international interests (Stamnes, 2020; Wigell, 2013). This applies particularly to small and middle states that wish to raise their status and increase their social and soft power abroad (Ingebritsen, 2002; Zhukova, Sundström, and Elgström, 2022). Hence, FFP states, which all are small or middle states, can exert influence in the global community by establishing a “niche for themselves” (Björkdahl, 2020, p. 540). The adoption of a feminist approach to foreign policy signals their uniqueness and commitment as “good states,” prioritising the common good and global justice beyond their own national boundaries (Aggestam, Rosamond & Kronsell, 2019, p. 26). In addition to signalling a dedication to gender equality, feminist foreign policy indicates adherence to the norms and principles of the liberal international system, thereby reinforcing the notion of the “good” international actor (Lawler, 2013; Thomson, 2022).

Norm diffusion literature frequently regards nonstate actors as entrepreneurial agents who encourage powerful states to change their behaviour, primarily due to their impartial moral agency and non-involvement in global politics (Davies & True, 2017). Other scholars have advanced the idea that state actors can also be norm entrepreneurs (Aggestam, & True, 2020; Davies & True, 2017). While nonstate actors must turn to advocacy to shape the global agenda, state actors can utilize their positionality and relative power to introduce particular norms by reinterpreting what constitutes their

“national interest” and its broader implications (Aggestam, & True, 2020, p. 152). I situate Spain’s alignment with the emerging trend of FFP states advocating for normative changes towards feminist behaviours and values within this scholarship on norm entrepreneurship and international leadership.

1.3 HEGEMONIC FEMINISATION AND GENDERED GLOBAL HIERARCHIES

Scholars and CSOs often claim that a feminist approach to foreign policy prioritises “peace over security, inclusion over exclusion, mediation over sanctions, solidarity over competition, and cooperation over domination” (Zilla, 2022, p. 4). Hence, FFP can contribute to current multilateral systems and foster international cooperation, leading to fairer outcomes (Vishwanath & Mukund, 2022, p. 144 & 146). According to Thompson et al. (2020), FFP further disrupts “colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures” (p. 4). Other authors question whether FFP actually promotes cross-border solidarity and argue that this approach fails to challenge the hierarchical global order characterized by patriarchal, racist, capitalist, and colonial structures (Zhukova, 2023; Thomson, 2022). Zhukova (2023) introduces the idea of *hegemonic feminisation* to demonstrate how hierarchies in global politics are maintained, reproduced, or created among FFP states that evaluate each other based on perceived accomplishments in gender equality, using specific temporal and spatial criteria to determine what is a ‘good’ FFP (p. 848). She explains that countries in the Global North compete to advance their own version of hegemonic feminisation, while countries of the Global South must either perform *complicit feminisation*—following and reproducing the standards set by the Global North—or *subordinate feminisation*—offering different criteria to the Global North’s idea of hegemonic feminisation (Zhukova, 2023, p. 851).

As a result, the ranking of states not only creates multiple forms of hegemonic feminisation but also reinforces the existing global hierarchies between the Global North and Global South through “liberal ideas of feminism” (Zhukova, 2023, p. 851). Similarly, Thomson (2022) argues that states adopt FFP to demonstrate their commitment to the international liberal order. FFP is exclusively adopted by small and middle states that aim to gain relevancy on the international stage by setting themselves apart from other non-FFP states with similar rankings (Thomson, 2022, p. 184). By categorising states as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, FFP sustains existing gendered global hierarchies,

Mar Oller Sigró
Dismantling or Reinforcing Power Structures?

with ‘good’ representing “Western (neo)colonial states” for gender equality and ‘bad’ referring to states without FFP that require guidance (Thomson , 2022, p. 177). Overall, both Zhukova (2023) and Thomson (2022) contest the belief that FFP encourages solidarity and challenges existing global hierarchies. While the first shows how gendered hierarchies are present among FFP states, the latter expands this critique to include hierarchies between FFP and non-FFP states.

Using the literature and theoretical concepts from this section, the following chapters provide an in-depth analysis of the Spanish FFP. I explore its role in either reinforcing or challenging power imbalances and evaluate the transformative potential of the policy framework.

CHAPTER 2. A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SPAIN'S FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

In her first appearance before the Committee on Foreign Affairs³ in 2020, Arancha González Laya, the former Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, announced Spain's interest in adopting a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP). As part of this strategy, and in coherence with its domestic policies, the Spanish government proposed to incorporate and prioritise a feminist lens to all foreign policy actions. González Laya explained that this approach involved the presence of "gender sensitivity in our policies and instruments of foreign action, including development cooperation, in our embassies and consulates that have the specific mission of protecting Spanish victims of gender-based violence abroad" and "the presence of women in diplomatic careers and in positions of responsibility."⁴ In the following years, the country developed an action plan to be implemented from 2023 to 2024.

There is no single definition of FFP; as feminism is pluralistic and multifaceted, so too is FFP. The lack of consensus has allowed countries embracing a feminist approach to their foreign policy to adapt it to their own ambitions and particular cultural, political, and social context, highlighting some aspects of FFP and obscuring others. While some countries such as Sweden prioritise women's rights, representation and resources in international affairs, other countries such as Germany adopt a more transformative approach that seeks to overcome patriarchal and colonial structures that contribute to inequality and discrimination and influence the development of foreign policy. In general, FFP aims at advancing a holistic approach to foreign policy with an increased gender awareness and prioritisation that takes unequal power relations and underlying causes of inequality into consideration.

Each FFP tells us a different story about a country's values, goals and transformative potential. A close examination of the policy documents from different FFP states can reveal the underlying theories and concepts driving their strategies. Spain has formulated its own policy document, drawing on the examples set by previous FFPs,

³ A body within the Spanish Permanent Legislative Committees of the Senate.

⁴ Spanish Government. (2020). XIV Legislatura. Comparecencia del Gobierno en Comisión (arts. 202 y 203). *Solicitud de comparecencia, a petición propia, de la Ministra de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación, ante la Comisión correspondiente, para informar sobre las líneas generales de la política de su Departamento (214/000005)*, (nº 43), 2. Retrieved from https://www.congreso.es/public_oficiales/L14/CONG/DS/CO/DSCD-14-CO-43.PDF#page=2

including those of Sweden and Canada. In this chapter, I explore various feminist theories—including liberal feminism, intersectional feminism and postcolonial feminism—to uncover the theoretical foundation underpinning of the Spanish FFP. Through this analysis, I argue that Spain’s FFP mainly follows liberal feminism by focusing on a rights-based approach, economic growth and representation. This idea is reinforced by the limitations of the FFP’s intersectional framework, gender mainstreaming strategy, and lack of a postcolonial analysis that takes into account existing power imbalances, not only within Spain but also with regard to its relationship with other countries. As a consequence, the Spanish FFP may uphold Western standards on how to *do* feminism, thus undermining alternative and more inclusive ways to achieve gender equality. The central argument of this chapter is that the Spanish FFP’s transformative potential, which is one of its main goals and principles, is limited by the FFP’s adherence to liberal ideas and its failure to incorporate a comprehensive intersectional and postcolonial feminist approach.

First, the chapter will explore how the Spanish FFP constructs the problem to be solved with this approach, namely structural gender inequality, and how it frames gender equality as a solution and goal in itself through a one-size-fits-all approach. After defining how Spain conceptualises gender equality, the chapter will analyse the strategies implemented by the FFP, both gender mainstreaming and international cooperation, in order to advance its goals of gender equality, structural transformation, and equal representation and rights between men and women, among others. The main materials analysed in this section are official policy documents, that is, the FFP document titled “Spain’s Feminist Foreign Policy: Promoting Gender Equality in Spain’s External Action” and the Action Plan for the FFP.

2.1. ANALYSING THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM IN THE FFP

2.1.1. Spain’s Understanding of Structural Gender Inequality

Spain identifies structural gender inequality across the world as the problem to be addressed through its foreign policy. The main policy document argues that “the prevalence of inequalities between women and men underscores the need to step up efforts to close gender gaps” (MAUC, 2021, p. 5). The foreign policy Action Plan also highlights the importance of adopting a “feminist perspective” that seeks to “address the underlying structural causes of gender inequalities and relate these to other factors of

discrimination” (MAUC, 2023, p. 8). Accordingly, Spain conceives the FFP as a tool to foster real and effective equality at the global level, regarding gender equality as a cross-cutting principle in foreign action. The policy documents that execute this strategy adhere to the domestic policy framework set by the Organic Law 3/2007 for the Effective Equality of Women and Men and the Third Strategic Plan for the Effective Equality of Women and Men (PEIEMH) 2022-2025, the Government’s major policy plan to advance pivotal social changes in the realm of gender equality.

The Spanish FFP frames the government’s compromises—the integration of the principle of equality across all foreign policy actions, the empowerment of women and girls, structural transformation for gender equality, and the promotion of intersectionality—in line with domestic efforts towards gender equality and strategically deployed as instruments to further national interests. Spain’s FFP links the promotion of equality with the advancement of diversity and wealth, illustrating how a commitment to gender equality not only strengthens individual rights but also serves as a catalyst for economic wealth, prosperity and justice. In this context, Feminist Diplomacy is seen as a requirement to fostering a better and more just world, where “women and men are equal in rights and opportunities. Nothing more. Nothing less” (MAUC, 2021, p. 4). The prioritisation of equality, autonomy, economic growth and a rights-based approach is consistent with a liberal feminist rationale, which has often been criticized due to its disregard for diversity and collective concerns.

Despite following a liberal feminist narrative, the FFP document acknowledges and takes into consideration intersectionality in its approach to addressing societal inequalities. This framework is one of the FFP’s five guiding principles: (1) transformative approach, (2) committed leadership, (3) ownership, (4) fostering alliances and inclusive participation, and (5) intersectionality and diversity. The foreign policy recognizes the effect of different intersecting identities, including ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, religion, disability, and geographical background (MAUC, 2021, p. 8). Nonetheless, there is little consideration given to the practical application and operationalization of this term within policy implementation and decision-making processes. The FFP mainly argues for the effort to reduce multiple discriminations and the need to incorporate this approach but is vague in terms of concrete measures and strategies to achieve this goal, which may hinder the translation of these broad principles into tangible, effective actions. The abstraction in policy implementation

allows the Spanish government to present itself as progressive and transforming to society without the necessity to address underlying systemic problems through meaningful reforms.

2.1.2. The Limitations of the Spanish FFP: a One-size-fits-all Approach

In order to analyse the goal of the Spanish FFP, it is crucial to understand how Spain conceptualizes gender equality. The Action Plan to the FFP aims to ensure that women and girls enjoy the same rights, financial autonomy, freedom, professional development and participation in society as men (MAUC, 2023, p. 27). This policy includes efforts to combat gender-based violence (GBV), promote women's economic participation, and support female leadership in preventing and keeping the peace. As discussed beforehand, this FFP gives considerable importance to women's rights, economic autonomy and representation, values aligned with liberal feminism. Additionally, it does not make any distinction between the contextual realities of other countries and societies but rather understands these principles as universally applicable. A one-size-fits-all approach to gender equality is problematic because it disregards the different needs and experiences of women and girls around the world, which non-Western societies may interpret as an imposition of Western values, hence undermining the effectiveness of FFP and impeding progress in gender equality. While the FFP seeks to "combat violence against women and children" (MAUC, 2023, p. 4) as a general objective, it fails to consider the unique cultural, social, and economic circumstances that may influence the manifestation and dynamics of GBV in other settings. This situates the discussion and efforts against GBV primarily within Western paradigms, potentially misrepresenting the experiences and concerns of women in non-Western societies (Kurzman et al., 2019). Here we observe the limitations inherent in the intersectionality approach promoted by the Spanish FFP. The lack of consideration for historical and political contexts, combined with the belief in universally applicable pathways to equality, reinforces existing power imbalances (Nylund et al., 2023, p. 269). As a consequence, failing to incorporate a postcolonial feminist perspective in foreign policy may perpetuate the status quo instead of addressing structural and intersecting inequalities (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018).

The Spanish policy document conceives gender equality as advantageous for everyone: "Gender equality is not only a matter of rights and social justice; achieving gender equality benefits society as a whole" (MAUC, 2021, p. 6). This conveys the idea

that women, despite being in a disadvantaged position in society, hold the potential to significantly contribute to societal improvement. Therefore, women are not reduced to being passive victims but are rather viewed as agents of change. In terms of economic empowerment, the FFP refers to women as “agents of wealth creation,” and gender equality as a requirement to strengthen “employment, economic growth, increased productivity, and improved social structures” (MAUC, 2021, p. 27). This approach sees women’s empowerment as a driving force for economic growth and the enhancement of national economic competitiveness, a neoliberal rationale that links gender equality with efficiency (Elias, 2013). Based on the FFP, women are the key to social, political and economic development, which implies that their rights, needs, and identities are not viewed as individual but rather in relation to the positive consequences their development will have on the whole of society (Thomson, 2020, p. 430). Such a policy regards women predominantly as instrumental, in other words, as a means to achieve outstanding outcomes that serve the collective interests of society. However, this instrumentalist perspective on empowerment fails to acknowledge the gendered power dynamics that shape the environments in which these women and girls operate as active agents (Van Eerdewijk & Davids, 2014, p. 308). Although it is beyond the scope of this analysis, critics such as Jason Hickel (2014) have also raised concerns about the Western-centric, liberal and individualistic notions associated with the term “empowerment,” as well as its assumed universality.

Although the Spanish FFP strives for equal representation, opportunities and rights between men and women, it fails to actively engage men in the pursuit of gender equality. The policy document states that women suffer discrimination in contrast to their male counterparts and offers guidance towards reversing this situation through their leadership but does not involve men in the effort to dismantle systemic structures of inequality. It also constructs gender inequality as a women’s issue, instead of recognizing it as a broader societal concern and a collective responsibility that requires the active participation and support of men. This idea is reinforced by the FFP’s failure to acknowledge the challenges that men face due to gender inequality and toxic and violent masculinities. As a result, the Spanish FFP perpetuates harmful gender binary divisions, essentializing women as victims while excluding men from the discourse on gender issues. This narrow focus not only limits the effectiveness of the FFP, but it also hinders progress toward genuine gender equality. While it is preferable to have a FFP in place, such a

framework is limited and is therefore unable to achieve its transformative goals. This issue remains prevalent in Spain's primary strategies for reinforcing and executing feminist diplomacy: gender mainstreaming and international cooperation.

2.2. STRATEGIC INITIATIVES FOR A FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY

2.2.1. Gender Mainstreaming

The MAUC highlights the mainstreaming of the gender approach as the primary tool to implement FFP. This strategy involves applying a gender approach into all foreign policy instruments, actions, areas and developments. Even though this is a common strategy among countries pursuing a FFP to ensure gender equality in policymaking (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Chile, 2024; Auswärtigen Amts, 2023, p. 9), it has come under scrutiny because of its shortcomings in transforming the existing conditions of inequality. A key issue lies in the conflation of gender mainstreaming and gender perspective. Booth and Bennett (2002) explain that a gender perspective “acknowledges the differences between women and between men” and “promotes actions that aim to transform the organization of society to a fairer distribution of human responsibilities (p. 434). Instead, gender mainstreaming is a strategy that not only draws on the gender perspective but also on the equal treatment perspective and the women's perspective, which are related to the need to secure resources and voice (Booth and Bennett, 2002, p. 433).

A gender mainstreaming strategy that only takes gender perspective into account offers a one-dimensional approach to gender inequalities and considers other intersecting factors of inequality, including race, ethnicity, class, and religious beliefs among others, simply as an “add-on to gender” (Hankivsky, 2005, p. 986). The Spanish FFP follows this narrow framework: “The goal is to bring about a structural change in working methods and institutional culture so that gender perspective is systematically mainstreamed in every action of the Foreign Service.” Such an approach is not able to address the underlying power structures and systemic inequalities that perpetuate gender disparities. For example, the Spanish FFP says in the intersectionality and diversity section that “in addition to gender discrimination, women may also suffer discrimination due to their ethnic or racial origin, sexual orientation and gender identity (LBTI women), economic status, religious beliefs, disability or place of origin” (MAUC, 2021, p. 8). This approach sees intersecting identities as additional factors, failing to acknowledge that in some

instances, they might be “the primary cause of discrimination, oppression and inequality” (Hankivsky, 2005, p. 987). Moreover, as part of its gender mainstreaming strategy, the Spanish FFP talks about “recognising the existence of intersectional and multiple forms of discrimination” (MAUC, 2021, p. 8). Despite the importance of an intersectional approach, the term “recognising” does not indicate change or action, which diminishes the FFP’s goal of enacting structural transformation.

The application of a gender mainstreaming strategy is further complicated by the necessity to translate abstract and theoretical feminist ideas, developed from spaces of dissidence, into the realm of the state. To integrate a gender approach to foreign policy that is transformative, states must recognize their role in perpetuating gender inequality and regulating gender relations (Cavaghan, 2017, 184). Due to the limitations of gender mainstreaming, many CSOs and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have demanded that governments go beyond this approach in the implementation of FFP. For instance, in its 10-point FFP Manifesto to advance Peace and Security, PAX (2023) argues that “a truly *feminist* foreign policy is more than a gender mainstreaming policy and should aim to systemically change unjust global hierarchies” (p. 1). Without meaningful gender-transformative policies that disrupt the status quo and address the root causes of inequality, gender mainstreaming becomes a buzzword, void of substantive impact.

2.2.2. International Cooperation

The remaining instruments mentioned by the Spanish FFP aim to promote cooperation at the regional, bilateral, multilateral and EU levels. This is a framework based on partnership, shared values, international norms, and the collective goal of gender equality, in line with the goal of feminist diplomacy which, according to the UN Deputy Secretary-General (2023), “calls for a shift of mindset away from confrontation and towards dialogue, engagement, cooperation and peace.” Hence, Spain’s strategy of international cooperation and multilateralism responds to the FFP’s demand to move away from military power and national interests to invest in diplomatic engagement and a holistic, human rights-centred approach to security that is both inclusive and sustainable.

For decades, feminist activists have advocated for the advancement of non-violent approaches to foreign policy. This idea has been supported by women’s international organisations such as Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF),

Saferworld and Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), which have argued that a feminist approach to foreign policy must advance towards disarmament and demilitarisation (GAPS, Saferworld, et al., 2023). This stands at odds with Spain's endorsement of nuclear weapons, as evidenced by their reticence to sign and ratify the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW) and their consistent vote against all UN General Assembly resolutions on the TPNW (ICAN, 2024). The country rejects the TPNW due to its membership in NATO, an organisation that aspires to sustain its nuclear alliance status and is therefore opposed to the signing of the treaty (NATO, 2020). Moreover, Spain is the world's eighth largest arms exporter in the period 2019-2023, illustrating a stark contrast between its policies and the principles of FFP (SIPRI, 2024).

Spain's FFP identifies global structural gender inequality as the problem, and international cooperation as the solution to achieve global gender equality. However, operating within established structures of the liberal international system poses significant obstacles to the Spanish FFP in realizing its transformative goals, especially in challenging existing power dynamics. This becomes apparent in the terminology used by the policy document: "supporting", "reinforcing", "strengthening" and "mainstreaming" (MAUC, 2021, p. 9-20). This type of language suggests a superficial reform towards gender equality, failing to address the underlying international structures which perpetuate inequality. Nonetheless, the adoption of a FFP, even if not transforming in its actions, represents a positive step in the prioritisation of gender equality, not only within Spain's foreign engagement but also across the broader multilateral system.

2.3. CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the Spanish FFP through a variety of feminist strands—liberal feminism, postcolonial feminism and intersectional feminism—to establish the theoretical underpinnings of the FFP policy documents. It has determined that the Spanish FFP is mainly informed by a liberal understanding of feminism. While it includes an intersectional approach to FFP, the lack of a postcolonial discourse diminishes the transformative potential of this innovative framework. Spain targets structural gender inequality, both in the country and across borders, as the issue to address through its FFP. It also identifies gender mainstreaming in all of its foreign actions and international cooperation as the main avenues for achieving gender equality. Because these strategies are conceptualised and operationalised through liberal feminism, the

Mar Oller Sigró
Dismantling or Reinforcing Power Structures?

Spanish FFP falls short in its aim to address systemic inequalities and existing power structures. In the next chapter, I will address the underlying motivations for Spain's adoption of a FFP amidst the wider trend of FFP states.

CHAPTER 3. SPAIN'S ROLE AS A NORM ENTREPRENEUR

In October 2014, Sweden became the first country to officially adopt a FFP as a distinctive aspect of its diplomatic efforts. According to the former Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Margot Wallström, who coined the term “feminist foreign policy,” this is a necessary approach to stand against the “systematic and global subordination of women” (Nordberg, 2015), and an “essential element in order to achieve other objectives, such as sustainable peace, security and development” (Government Offices of Sweden, 2019, p. 63). This pioneering policy also showcased Sweden’s commitment to gender equality beyond its own initiatives at the national level. Following Sweden’s implementation of a FFP, a trend emerged among different countries as they increasingly adopted feminist approaches to their foreign policy agendas; for instance, Canada adopted a FFP in 2017, France in 2019 and Mexico in 2020. Although each country interprets FFP in their own manner, the overarching objective remains consistent: addressing and transforming current power imbalances and structural inequalities in global systems.

But normative change does not occur in a void. It involves individual and collective agents who actively push for the adherence to certain values and behaviours within a community. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) refer to these nonstate agents as “norm entrepreneurs,” who advocate for the emergence of new norms within established standards of “appropriateness,” employing persuasion to encourage other states to partake in this “normative contestation” (p. 897). Sundström and Elgström (2020) applied this framework to explore Sweden’s role in the adoption of its FFP and its ability to challenge existing normative frameworks on the international stage by reinforcing already established gender equality norms in Sweden. After the Swedish government set the precedent, other small and middle powers followed its example by adopting a FFP, thus creating a network of norm entrepreneurs. Accordingly, this group is at the forefront of feminist agenda-setting at the international level, taking a leading role in the fight against gender inequality and discrimination.

In this chapter, I examine *why* the Spanish government has decided to pursue a feminist approach in its foreign policy. My argument is that Spain has decided to pursue a FFP for three main reasons. First, the Spanish government’s adoption of a FFP aligns “norm entrepreneurship” framework, reflecting its ambition to enhance its soft power

and assume leadership within this group of norm entrepreneurs. Second, Spain's domestic expertise in gender equality and coherence between national and external policy underpins the country's commitment to gender equality in foreign policy. Finally, Sweden's abandonment of its FFP after a change of government in 2022 has created an opportunity for Spain to strategically position itself as a global leader in gender equality. This section contributes to the scholarship that frames states as norm entrepreneurs, as I demonstrate that states are not only sites from where norms are dictated but also play an active role in shaping norm emergence and diffusion.

The following section describes how Spain has assumed leadership in gender equality progress, influencing the development of global norms on this issue. In the next part, I show how its leadership is legitimised through its expertise on feminist domestic policies and supported by the domestic political struggle between the Spanish left and right. Finally, the last section examines how Spain could take advantage of Sweden's abandonment of its FFP to emerge as a global leader in FFP and gender equality.

3.1. ASSUMING LEADERSHIP IN GENDER EQUALITY

The Spanish government regards itself as a leader in the promotion of feminist initiatives and policies on gender equality. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, José Manuel Albares, explained this in the announcement of the Action Plan to the FFP: “We are at the forefront of resolutions and declarations condemning the violation of both women and girls' rights, (...) as well as important initiatives that enable progress to be made in the fight against inequality” (MAUC, 2023). Hence, Spain considers that it is already a leader in feminist initiatives, regardless of its formal adoption of a FFP. Nonetheless, embracing this approach reaffirms its commitment to gender equality in all domestic and international political actions. As it will be thoroughly analysed in Chapter 4, Spain solidifies its position of authority through its adherence to the exclusive group of states that have adopted a FFP and are acting as catalysts for change. In a meeting with Justin Trudeau, the president of the Spanish Government, Pedro Sánchez, stated that “Spain and Canada are among the proud few countries that have a feminist foreign policy in place, and this is already yielding results” (RTVE Noticias, 2022). This statement indicates that only a limited number of FFP countries are leading efforts for gender equality, actively shaping global norms through their commitment to FFP and encouraging other nations to adopt similar feminist principles through

diplomatic practices. In other words, FFP-aligned countries claim to challenge patriarchal, racist and colonial values, behaviours and norms entrenched in traditional international systems through their leadership and norm entrepreneurship.

Apart from its involvement with the group of FFP states, Spain also strives to be a leader within the existing network of norm entrepreneurs for gender equality. As the former Minister of Equality, Irene Montero said: “Spain must be, and continue to be, an international model for feminist public policies” (Ministry of Equality, 2021). The Spanish FFP also states that Spain is “reinforcing its leading position in the promotion and defence of gender equality and the rights of women and girls in all their diversity” through its FFP (MAUC, 2023, p. 7). Here we see that Spain considers itself to be a pioneer in advancing gender equality on a global stage and is seeking to reinforce this status. By positioning itself as a model for feminist public policies, Spain aims not only to set high standards at the domestic and international levels but also to influence and inspire other countries to adopt similar measures. Spain’s adoption of a FFP also exemplifies that its legitimacy as an international model of conduct stems from its dedicated commitment to domestic gender equality. In the presentation of the Feminist Foreign Policy Guide, Madeleine Albright further highlights Spain’s efforts, complimenting them “for their commitment to the integration of women in all spheres of the foreign policy action plan” and calling it “leadership” (La Moncloa, 2021b). She argues that due to Spain’s vision and determination, the country “has become a benchmark of excellence and inclusion that can serve as a model for governments around the world” (La Moncloa, 2021b).

The decline in Spain’s soft power due to the COVID-19 crisis, which led to a drop in international tourism—a crucial source of revenue and global appeal for Spain—further explains its commitment to the FFP network. According to Zhukova, Sundström and Elgström (2022), states formulate certain strategic narratives to enhance their soft power aims on the global stage. The surge of feminism in international popular discourse in the 21st century, both through media and policymaking, also allows FFP to elevate small and middle states’ relevance in the international arena (Thomson, 2022). A study of the Índice de Presencia Global by the Real Instituto Elcano has shown that “Spain is the country that loses the greatest volume of global presence among the 150 countries calculated by the Index” (Olivié & Gracia, 2022, p. 7). This includes a substantial decrease in the economic and soft power dimensions, the latter experiencing

a 16% of variation between 2021 and 2022 (p. 18). Because of Spain's diminishing relevancy and visibility in global affairs, the country has turned to FFP and public diplomacy to project its image as a feminist country, in line with the growing influence of popular feminism in social media spaces in the current era (Banet-Weiser, 2018). The adoption of a FFP serves to raise its status as a middle power and facilitates its participation in international politics, as it positions itself at the forefront of gender equality and human rights advocacy while influencing the discourse on FFP as a norm entrepreneur. Spain promotes its domestic expertise on the international stage to bolster its image as a progressive model and leader. This strategy strengthens Spain's legitimacy and credibility as a trailblazer in feminist foreign policy issues.

3.2. DOMESTIC POLICIES AND POLITICS AS LEGITIMATION TECHNIQUES

To establish itself as a leader internationally and within the FFP group, Spain showcases its progress in domestic policy. While the government acknowledges the extensive work remaining to accomplish gender equality and the universal challenge of closing the gender gap, Pedro Sánchez affirms that Spain is “one of the most advanced countries” in this matter (La Moncloa, 2021b). For instance, the Spanish president emphasizes that he presides over the government with the highest number of female ministers in democratic history and is among the most gender-equitable governments worldwide, as it ranks among the top current governments for gender parity levels on a global scale (La Moncloa, 2023). Other countries that have adopted or are developing a FFP have been criticised by academics and civil society due to a lack of coherence between their domestic and foreign policies, as is the case of Mexico. Since 2006, the Mexican government has promoted the militarization of public security, which has resulted in grave human rights violations and perpetuated impunity, exemplified by the steep rise of femicides (Papagiotti, 2023, p. 19). With over 920 cases in 2022, the country held the second-highest femicide rate in Latin America (Statista, 2024). Moreover, the actions of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador in suppressing national feminist movements with authoritarian tactics have undermined Mexico's legitimacy as a feminist state on the international level (García, Arceta & Velasco, 2023, p. 14 & 32).

On the other hand, Spain can distinguish itself from other FFP states through its progress in the advancement of gender equality within its borders and consistency

between domestic and foreign rhetoric. Unlike other countries with a FFP, the Spanish FFP document explicitly tackles the need for a coherent approach between its national policy and the state's external action, not only to maintain the "country's credibility" but also as a "reflection, at the international level, of the commitment of the Government of Spain to equality and women's rights" (MAUC, 2021, p. 4 & 5). The FFP guide further argues that Spain has been able to become an "international reference" due to its normative framework and public policies aimed at addressing gender-based violence and fostering gender equality in the workplace, among other aspects (MAUC, 2021, p. 5). The Spanish government can therefore draw on its domestic policies to position itself as a leader in gender equality and consolidate its image as a world reference in feminism, the fight for women's rights and FFP (La Moncloa, 2024; Montano, 2019).

In response to internal political dynamics, several states implement a FFP to mark their transition to new administrations after national elections (Haastrup, 2020; Thomson, 2022, p. 13). Therefore, the domestic politics of a certain country influence whether a state adopts a FFP or not. One key reason behind Spain's adoption of a FFP is the national struggle between the surging reactionary right and the declining political left, which escalated in Spain with the emergence of the far-right party VOX as the third political force in parliament in 2019 (Zhukova, 2023, p. 846). Under the leadership of a leftist government, the government marks itself as distinctly feminist to highlight the contrast with their political counterparts: "Feminism means equality, which is what makes the heart of democratic socialism beat" (PSOE, 2022). It is for this reason that Sánchez announced that the government would place feminism and equality at the heart of all political action, which includes foreign policy efforts (La Moncloa, 2023). Sánchez also marked a departure from earlier governments by proclaiming himself to be a "more feminist politician," signalling a break from the traditional male-dominated political landscape (La Moncloa, 2021a). In this context, the pursuit of a FFP signals a distinction from the rising right towards more inclusive and "progressive" policies for gender equality both at the domestic and international levels (MAUC, 2023). Amidst the rise of the far right everywhere, a FFP also serves to showcase Spain as a "good" global actor in the eyes of the international community and the Spanish society, shaping its identity as feminist, inclusive, and forward-thinking. The Spanish government believes that the Guide is a reinforcement from Spain to the international commitments

outlined in the Beijing Conference in 1995 and the 2030 Agenda (La Moncloa, 2021b), thus demonstrating its “adherence to the liberal world order” and its role as a “‘good’ international actor” (Thomson, 2022, p. 1). As a result, domestic policies and politics play a role in reinforcing Spain’s leadership in shaping the global agenda and advancing feminist action in international affairs.

3.3. SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY: SPAIN’S POTENTIAL FOR GLOBAL LEADERSHIP IN FFP

The existence of a FFP in a country is contingent upon the decisions of the governing administration, which has the authority to adopt this feminist approach, maintain it or even abandon it. As explained beforehand, adopting a FFP can signify a break from a conservative government to a more progressive leadership. Conversely, a shift towards right-wing governance may lead to prioritising policy agendas that diverge from feminist principles, prompting the abandonment of the framework altogether. This is the case of Sweden. While it was the first to create the term “Feminist Foreign Policy” and implement it, it was also the first to withdraw the approach in 2022 after the victory of the right-wing bloc in the general elections. With Sweden’s abandonment of its FFP, Sweden may lose its global leadership status on gender issues because of its inability to meet the high expectations of other European countries regarding Sweden’s active role and model in gender equality (Towns, et al., 2024). A 2023 analysis of convergence patterns in the Gender Equality Index on the performance of EU Member States shows that Sweden is among the group of ‘flattening’ states, that is, states whose gender equality levels exceed the EU average, but slower progress has gradually narrowed the gaps between them and the EU (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). On the contrary, Spain is among the countries that are outperforming the EU average on gender equality issues more rapidly (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023). With high gender equality standards and status as a “model for governments around the world” (La Moncloa, 2021b), Spain now has the opportunity to assume a leadership position in advancing gender equality.

In the absence of Sweden, Spain is in a position to lead future initiatives through a “committed leadership,” a central principle of the Spanish FFP (MAUC, 2023, p. 4). Spain had previously joined Sweden to lead relevant FFP actions, such as the creation of the FFP+ Group at the United Nations, thereby displaying its commitment to gender

equality and assuming the position of a “co-leader” in FFP. The space facilitated by the FFP+ Group acts as an organisational platform for norm entrepreneurs to promote their norms, encouraging other actors to adopt them and incorporate norm socialisation into their agendas (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998, p. 899). Per the previous subsection, Spain supports its leadership efforts with its domestic expertise and coherence between domestic and international policies. This sets the country apart from others in the network of FFP states and is used by the Spanish government to enhance and legitimise its position as a moral authority in the international community. In a study conducted by Zhukova, the author found that both Sweden and Spain perceived their own international standing to be higher because of their adoption of feminist domestic policies in comparison to other states such as Mexico, with Spain considering FFP as a “completion of feminist policy in general, not only in foreign policy” (Zhukova, 2023, p. 857). However, how a country presents itself may not correlate with how it is perceived by the rest of state actors. Although this is out of the scope of this thesis, further research is required to understand how other FFP countries perceive Spain’s legitimacy, leadership, coherence, and success in FFP.

3.4. CONCLUSION

After analysing Spain’s role as a norm entrepreneur, this chapter concludes that Spain has implemented a FFP to gain relevance and soft power in international politics as a middle power. Through its strong commitment to gender equality, Spain has assumed a leadership position in feminist foreign policy and strives to be a model for other countries. In this chapter, I have also illustrated how Spain establishes its leadership role through its own progress in domestic policies and coherence between its domestic and foreign policies. Finally, I have underscored how FFP frameworks can be disrupted by changes in government. The recent abandonment of FFP by the Swedish government has opened an opportunity for Spain to reinforce its leadership on gender equality on the global stage. Having explored why Spain pursues a FFP, the next chapter will show how it does so, and examine whether the Spanish FFP challenges or reinforces dominant global hierarchies of inequality.

CHAPTER 4. THE IMPACT OF SPAIN'S FFP ON GLOBAL HIERARCHIES AND STRUCTURAL INEQUALITIES

Due to the importance of a collective approach, it is widely assumed that all countries adopting a FFP favour solidarity and cooperation over competition, power and domination. In fact, as explained in the previous section, the Spanish FFP conceives cooperation at the regional, bilateral, multilateral and EU level as a key instrument to carry out their policy (MAUC, 2021, p. 9-20). Civil society actors, academics and FFP actors maintain that a feminist approach to foreign policy usually “argues for demilitarisation and for prioritising peace over security, inclusion over exclusion, mediation over sanctions, solidarity over competition, and cooperation over domination” (Zilla, 2022, p. 4). They contend that to effectively challenge global patriarchal structures, states must embrace a framework centred on solidarity and cooperation. As expressed by Amina Mohammed, Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, at the FFP+ ministerial meeting, UNGA 2023: “Feminist diplomacy is effective when it calls for shift of mindset. From confrontation – to dialogue, engagement, cooperation and peace” (Mohammed, 2023, as cited in Michalko, 2023, p. 1). Many CSOs have also argued that FFP must move away from national self-interested policies and prioritise a human security approach to its foreign policy responses that centres around the wellbeing, experiences and agency of marginalised people to challenge the harmful impacts of patriarchy, colonisation, heteronormativity, capitalism, racism, imperialism, and militarism (CFFP; n.d., Papagiotti, 2023, p. 14; PAX, 2023, p. 1; Women in International Security, 2023).

However, other authors have questioned whether FFP states challenge structural inequalities through cooperation and have instead proposed that FFP reinforces existing gender hierarchies within the global order, thereby fostering competition instead of solidarity (Thomson, 2022; Zhukova, 2023). According to Zhukova (2023), the prevalence of competition over cooperation is not limited to FFP-aligned states against non-aligned ones; it also exists among states that have embraced FFP and are working “together” to fight global systemic gender inequality. She claims that a feminist perspective to foreign policy: (1) creates inequalities among states that adopt them, (2) privileges Western-centric paradigms of thought and action, and (3) prioritises differentiation over collective improvement and mutual support. Others have also raised

doubts about the purpose of a FFP, characterizing it as a “postcolonial export” from countries in the Global North (Thompson & Clement, 2019, p. 5).

In light of this debate, in this chapter I aim to analyse whether the Spanish government’s pursuit of a FFP corresponds with a commitment to international cooperation, or if it perpetuates existing power hierarchies and fosters competition over solidarity. Drawing from the concept of “hegemonic feminisation” put forward by Zhukova’s (2023) article, I examine Spain’s FFP and its relationships with other countries. I argue that Spain’s will to become a global leader in gender equality reinforces global power hierarchies due to its own perceived authority in the international arena and the lack of attention paid to postcolonialism in its FFP. Spain justifies its leadership in global politics with its domestic expertise in gender equality, which it deems crucial in acquiring a superior position to advance its own idea of feminist foreign policy to other states. Unlike Zhukova’s idea that FFPs create competition, I maintain that Spain fosters cross-border solidarity through a multilateralism approach to gain international support.

In the next section, I will first outline how Spain uses multilateral feminism as a key strategy to ensure the effectiveness of its FFP, thus fostering solidarity instead of competition. Following this, the next chapter will uncover how Spain continues to perpetuate dominant global hierarchies and power imbalances between the Global North and South through the promotion of its preferred hegemonic feminisation, potentially overlooking the unique feminist perspectives and needs of the Global South.

4.1. MULTILATERAL FEMINISM: AN APPROACH OF SOLIDARITY AND COOPERATION

Despite Spain’s own assumed leadership at the national and international levels, it recognises that solidarity and cooperation are crucial to implementing a feminist approach to foreign policy. As such, Spain regards international cooperation as a key mechanism to achieve gender equality. The preface of the Spanish FFP document states: “This Guide to Spain’s Feminist Foreign Policy is an operational guide for the practical implementation of a public policy, delivered through our commitment to multilateralism” (MAUC, 2021, p. 4). For this reason, the first objective of the Action Plan to the FFP is the advancement of gender equality and women’s rights through international cooperation in EU, bilateral and multilateral forums. In the presentation of the Feminist Foreign Policy Guide in 2021, Pedro Sánchez argued that “stronger

multilateralism is the only way to overcome the challenges facing the international community and our society” (La Moncloa, 2021b). Therefore, Spain’s pursuit of a FFP shows that multilateralism is a fundamental principle and approach in its international relations.

States adopting a FFP pursue a multilateralism that is markedly “feminist” because it is grounded on feminist principles: equity, inclusion, intersectionality and peace (Scheyer et al., 2021). This holistic approach questions the existing paradigms of foreign policy, which have traditionally been shaped by patriarchy, discrimination and racism (Thompson, et al., 2020, p. 5). The networks formed between states with a FFP are based on cooperation and solidarity as states acknowledge a shared global responsibility to overcome structural challenges (Michalko, 2023, p. 9), thus redefining the countries’ national interests and placing the well-being of all societies at the centre of all foreign policy actions. FFP is conceptualized in accordance with a feminist ethics of care, which utilizes empathetic cooperation and relational ontology to uncover moral relationships between humans (Aggestam, Rosamond & Kronsell, 2019), scrutinize the origins, causes, and mechanisms of exclusion and marginalization within current social and personal relationships (Robinson, 1997, p. 46), and listen to the voices, concerns and agendas of those who are often silenced in society (Sylvester, 1994, p. 317).

Following this idea, the Spanish FFP focuses on enhancing cooperation, recognising it as an “instrumental role in defending gender equality” (MAUC, 2021, p. 31). Sánchez further elaborates on Spain’s implementation of the FFP: “We have to promote agreements, identify joint projects, give visibility to women’s organizations and women’s human rights defenders” (La Moncloa, 2021a). In the 2022 NATO Summit, Pedro Sánchez proclaimed Spain and Canada’s shared feminist values and promotion of multilateralism as a strategy to address challenges transcending national borders, including climate change and social inequality (RTVE Noticias, 2022). It has also met with other FFP countries to assert their commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls everywhere, such as the Netherlands and Chile. In the meeting between José Manuel Albares and Hanke Bruins Slot, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, both representatives agreed to an ongoing and close cooperation to shape FFPs, exchange best practices, and provide joint training on gender equality in Foreign Policy for junior diplomats (Government of the Netherlands, 2024).

One of Spain's main initiatives is the creation, together with Sweden, of the Feminist Foreign Policy Plus Group (FFP+ Group) at the United Nations in January 2022, a cross-regional informal partnership between countries that have a FFP in place, have the willingness to adopt one or wish to support feminist perspectives. After the UNGA 78 meeting, the coalition of 18 UN Member States released a "Political Declaration on Feminist Approaches to Foreign Policy" (2023) to reaffirm their commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. The declaration also sought to raise awareness of the group's work and invite other countries with like-minded values to join the alliance, thus fostering solidarity and creating a stronger networked multilateralism for gender equality. Because many FFP frameworks prioritise the experiences of the voiceless and most vulnerable in society (Aggestam, & et al., 2019, p. 23), the FFP+ Group's presidency is shared between the Global North and the Global South, currently held by Spain and Mexico (MAUC, 2024a). This ensures that the experiences, challenges and opportunities of the Global South are put in the forefront. As Spain explains in one press release: "The Group's chairmanship rotates on a yearly basis to promote the inclusion and engagement of all members" (MAUC, 2024a). Papworth (2024) further agrees that the co-presidency structure of the FFP+ Group allows other states to learn from alternative foreign policymaking and overcome the universal approaches to FFP prevalent in the Global North (p. 8).

4.2. REINFORCING DOMINANT GLOBAL HIERARCHIES

In line with my previous analysis, the pursuit of a FFP signals Spain's commitment to advancing gender equality, its ability to influence global decisions on this matter and its position as a progressive state that counters anti-feminist and anti-democratic trends. Spain positions itself as a leader, thereby setting itself apart from other countries that also have a FFP in place. Its FFP policy document argues that the country's adoption of a feminist approach in foreign policy stems from "Spain's already existing leadership at the highest level in this area" (MAUC, 2021, p. 5). Thus, embracing a FFP supports Spain's aspiration to be a global model of gender equality. In fact, the president of the government believes that Spain is already a benchmark in this area (La Moncloa, 2024). Rather than becoming a world leader in FFP, its goal now is to "project the image of a Spain that has consolidated itself in recent years as a reference country in Feminist Foreign Policy" (MAUC, 2024b).

As explained in Chapter 3, Spain derives its assumed leadership in feminism from its own domestic progress. This distinguishes it from other states which have not achieved the same level of gender equality and feminist policy implementation. For instance, in response to the first inclusion of a female Vice President in the US, the Spanish president said the following: “Congratulations and welcome, because a long time ago in Spain, we managed to achieve that milestone” (La Moncloa, 2021a). Here we can see how progress is hierarchised in relation to a temporal ranking (Zhukova, 2023). I argue that Spain enjoys a higher standing in this social hierarchy precisely due to its precedence in adopting feminist policies, which in turn serves to reaffirm its leadership and legitimacy in the international arena. From its high position in the hierarchy, Spain can set its preference of normative criterion for feminist domestic policy progress, such as temporality in adopting domestic policies and long-standing commitment to them (Zhukova, 2023, p. 855). As the Swedish Deputy Executive Director of UN Women, Asa Regner, explains: “Spain has a long history and a proud tradition as a strong champion of gender equality, and women’s empowerment in the international arena,” and thus serves as a “trusted and reliable partner” for UN Women (MAUC, 2021).

While Spain roots its authority in the coherence between its domestic and international policies, it also acknowledges that the work done is not enough. Pedro Sánchez recognises that Spain is “advancing at a slower pace than we would like” and therefore “we need an extraordinary and global response inside and outside our borders” (La Moncloa, 2021a). Instead of shifting the problem to other regions and casting Spain as the solution, this perspective highlights the need for a collective, international effort to address gender equality comprehensively, both within Spain and around the world. Although this is a positive portrayal of Spain’s efforts towards gender equality, I argue that the Spanish FFP presents one key problem: the lack of a postcolonial discourse. Spain does not acknowledge how its own historical and patriarchal legacy has contributed to gender inequality in Latin America today. The absence of such an approach may hinder the transformative and intersectional potential of the FFP and instead perpetuate dominant global hierarchies that prioritise mainstream Western liberal feminism over non-dominant feminisms.

Spain’s FFP has two main areas of interest in the Global South: Latin America and the Sahel. As Sánchez put forward in the NATO Summit of 2022, he sees a “need

to promote a positive agenda of collaboration in Latin America that is mutually beneficial for both a region that is very important to Spain, which is Latin America, and for our country” (RTVE Noticias, 2022). The relevance of the territory stems from their common historical past, language and values. Hence, the state’s main priority is to strengthen collaboration with Latin American countries, which is accomplished through the promotion of the Ibero-American Programme on gender equality, an Ibero-American Summit system that prioritises gender mainstreaming across all initiatives and aims to further gender equality (MAUC, 2021, p. 10). Another crucial region for the Spanish government is the Sahel, not only because of economic interests but also due to security concerns, given the region’s ongoing decline in political stability and rise in insecurity (Guijarro, 2020). In this area, Spain aims to support gender equality through the G5 Sahel Alliance, a regional cooperation organization of five Sahel states: Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger (MAUC, 2021, p. 11).

Given Spain’s focus on these regions, the absence of a postcolonial FFP is particularly concerning because of the consequential potential to reproduce the dominant social order. For example, the Chilean Undersecretary of Foreign Affairs came to a visit in Spain to “learn in detail how Spain is implementing these policies” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024). Spain’s exporting of its own framework and priorities might reinforce established power imbalances between the Global North and the South, given that it would be a direct transfer of knowledge from the first, depriving Global South actors of their agency, autonomy, and independent knowledge (Zhukova, 2023, p. 846). Adopting the Spanish FFP as a model for those countries in the Global South can obscure their own unique needs and experiences, resulting in passive co-optation and reduced transformative capabilities (Sepúlveda Soto & Papworth, 2023). It also portrays Spain as a superior in the design and implementation of FFP when the framework has not been yet completely adopted by the Spanish government and has therefore not yielded major results. Spain can therefore push their idea of hegemonic feminisation to Chile due to its higher standing in the temporal hierarchy of FFP states. If the exchange of policy implementation strategies is not equal, with Chile exclusively deriving insights from Spain, Chile will engage in complicit feminisation, which contributes to “strengthening the hegemonic feminisation of the Global North” (Zhukova, 2023, p. 861). This dynamic perpetuates the notion that knowledge production for the FFP is primarily located in the West, which is both false and

problematic, considering the longstanding feminist involvement in foreign policy in the Global South, albeit without the specific label of “FFP” (Papworth, 2024).

4.3. CONCLUSION

Spain’s approach to FFP seeks to foster international solidarity through the promotion of a genuine exchange of experiences that respects the insights and expertise of the Global South, as seen with the FFP+ Group and other initiatives. With the analysis conducted in this section, Spain’s FFP seems to not create competition but rather solidarity through its multilateralism efforts. While the Spanish FFP fosters cooperation, its lack of a postcolonial perspective reproduces dominant global hierarchies that hinder the transformative capacity of the approach. As such, the country’s strategy is not rooted in “a lack of mutual respect for difference,” as Zhukova (2023) asserts about all FFPs, but rather in its aim to become a world leader in gender equality and its failure to address existing power hierarchies, advancing its own hegemonic feminisation on the basis of its higher temporal ranking. Challenging the prevailing patriarchal and racist global system requires adopting a truly transformative approach, which must include an intersectional and postcolonial perspective.

CONCLUSION

This research has examined the role of Spain's FFP in either contributing or challenging existing gender inequalities and power imbalances to achieve structural transformation. First, I analysed the two main Spanish FFP policy documents through a discourse analysis to conceptualise the FFP's goals, priorities and feminist underpinnings. The goal was to address the first sub-question, namely, which feminist theoretical frameworks inform the Spanish FFP. This research revealed that Spain's FFP is mainly informed by a (neo)liberal rationale that puts emphasis on equality, representation, autonomy, economic growth and rights. Although the Spanish FFP includes an intersectionality framework that seeks to account for intersecting inequalities for women and girls, the lack of a postcolonial perspective on feminism, coupled with the dominance of liberal feminism, results in a one-size-fits-all approach to FFP, undermining its transformative potential altogether. In this chapter, I also examined the Spanish FFP's two main strategies to achieve gender equality: gender mainstreaming and international cooperation. While gender mainstreaming is a widely used strategy of FFP implementation among other FFP states, I identified this framework to be incomplete because it treats intersecting identities as an "add-on to gender" (Hankivsky, 2005, p. 986) and only adds women to existing structures of foreign policy without addressing the root causes of inequality. Spain's international cooperation and commitments highlight the inherent contradictions in its FFP, demonstrated by its advocacy for peace and non-violent foreign policy juxtaposed with its endorsement of nuclear weapons and position as a major arms exporter. Future research should focus on the effectiveness of the Spanish FFP in practical matters.

Second, I explored the motivations for the Spanish government's decision to implement an FFP. My findings demonstrate that Spain acts as a norm entrepreneur in its pursuit of a FFP, actively shaping global norms on gender issues and encouraging other states to adopt similar policies. I contend that the Spanish government adopts an FFP for three main reasons. To begin with, Spain embraces a FFP to assume a leadership role in gender equality, both in relation to other countries and within the group of FFP states. As such, the Spanish government regards FFP as an instrument to gain relevance as a middle state, and thus become a model for gender equality issues on the international stage. Additionally, Spain establishes its leadership in gender equality

through its own domestic achievements. Its national commitment to feminism provides a credible basis for Spain to be a norm entrepreneur, a position supported by the coherence between its domestic and foreign policies. I also argued that the government's implementation of a FFP reflects its domestic political strategy. The left-leaning administration aims to present itself as feminist and progressive, positioning itself as a “good” international actor compared to its political opponents. This approach aligns with the government’s broader goal of enhancing its image as a champion of gender equality and progressive values on the global stage. Lastly, I showed that Spain has the opportunity to emerge as a leader in FFP due to Sweden’s withdrawal from its FFP following a change of government. Nonetheless, further research is required to assess whether Spain’s claim of leadership in gender equality corresponds with the perceptions of other countries.

Finally, the last chapter addressed the third sub-question: how does Spain pursue its FFP and position itself in the international sphere? This research demonstrated that Spain’s FFP framework is based on multilateral feminism, which shows its cooperation with international partners to advance gender equality at all levels. Spain has engaged in a myriad of joint projects and regular meetings to strengthen its commitment to FFP with other FFP states. It has also led the first informal cross-regional alliance of FFP countries at the UN, also known as the FFP+ Group, which has allowed for states in the Global South to promote alternative feminist approaches to foreign policy. Despite Spain’s apparent solidarity with other FFP states, I used the concept of “hegemonic feminisation” coined by Zhukova (2023) to explain how Spain continues to reinforce unjust global hierarchies and power imbalances. The findings of this study reveal that Spain’s perceived leadership, grounded in its early adoption and sustained implementation of feminist domestic policies, has facilitated the country’s advancement of its own hegemonic feminisation. Therefore, Spain claims a higher position in the hierarchy of FFP states due to its elevated temporal ranking. While Spain’s FFP strategy deviates from Zhukova’s (2023) conceptualization of FFP as competition- rather than solidarity-oriented, its lack of a postcolonial perspective continues to reinforce the power imbalances between the Global North and the Global South. The Spanish FFP cannot achieve true structural transformation without adopting an intersectional and postcolonial approach that addresses the root causes of inequality and dismantles patriarchal, colonial, and oppressive hierarchies.

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