



Revista Brasileira de  
Política Internacional

ISSN 1983-3121

<http://www.scielo.br/rbpi>

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# A feminist foreign policy for Brazil: challenges and possibilities

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-7329202300108>

Rev. Bras. Polít. Int., 66(1): e008, 2023

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze the feminist foreign policy as a modern phenomenon in light of the particular features and challenges of Brazil's reality. But first, the article contextualizes where the idea of a feminist foreign policy comes from. Even though women make up half of the world's population, gender parity in many spaces of power, such as diplomacy, is still not a reality. Thus, the so called feminist foreign policies aims, among others, to increase the number of female diplomats, grant them more visibility and place them in positions of power. Since this situation is happening worldwide, the paper aims to contribute on how we can think of the possibility of engendering a feminist foreign policy specific to Brazil.

**Keywords:** Feminist foreign policy; Brazilian foreign policy; Foreign policy analysis; Feminism.

Received: May 30, 2023

Accepted: October 02, 2023

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Over a period of less than a decade, many governments began to state they were adopting *feminist foreign policies*. The first country to make such an announcement was Sweden, in 2014. Soon Canada (2017), Luxembourg (2019), France (2019), Spain (2020), Malaysia (2020), Mexico (2020) and Germany (2022) followed. Norway and Finland undertook to promote public policies aimed at achieving equality between men and women in all areas. South Africa, Australia and the United Kingdom included the women, peace and security agenda among their foreign policy priorities (Aggestam and True 2020). Chile has recently joined this group, and Colombia is taking steps in the same direction ("Gobierno

<sup>1</sup> The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Brazil.

nacional planteó ante ONU mujeres la construcción de una política exterior feminista para el país.” 2022).

The purpose of this article is to analyze this modern phenomenon in light of the particular features and challenges of Brazil's reality. But first, it is important to put into context where the need to think of a *feminist foreign policy* comes from. In summary: from present-day reality, where 85% of ambassadors worldwide are men (Towns and Niklasson 2017, 529). Even though we women make up half of the world's population, gender parity in many spaces of power, such as diplomacy, is still not a reality.

Similar to the situation of elected offices nationwide, men have historically prevailed in foreign policy and diplomacy (Tickner 1992). There were legal barriers to prevent women from coming into diplomacy in many countries until recent decades. Female diplomats have more difficulty rising to positions of power than their male counterparts all over the world. In October 2020, women made up 26.9% of permanent representatives before the UN in New York, among 193 countries (Bozkir 2020).

Due to this reality, so-called feminist foreign policies aim to increase the number of female diplomats, grant them more visibility and put them in positions of power. Furthermore, in feminist foreign policies, the gender perspective became a cross-sectional part of the foreign policy approach, whether for cooperation policies, defense of the sexual and reproductive rights of women, or even the promotion of initiatives to fight violence and discrimination and promote gender equality.

Since this situation is happening worldwide, how can we think of the possibility of engendering a feminist foreign policy specific to Brazil? The first part of this article aims to apprehend traits of this phenomenon in other countries, exploring their importance, projection and limits, in order to help imagine a domestic model. The experiences in Sweden, Germany, Sweden and Chile, whose mutual differences and common characteristics demonstrate the range of this phenomenon, are important examples. Then, this article dives into Brazil's reality, where violence against women and the correlated underrepresentation in all spaces of power, including diplomacy, are central. Finally, based on the reality that constrains us, this article makes suggestions for the adoption of measures that, if not sufficient by themselves to describe a foreign policy as feminist, would certainly contribute to making it more equitable and representative of Brazilian society.

## A look at other countries

The cases of Sweden, Germany, Spain and Chile demonstrate the adoption of measures linked to the goal of gender equality in diplomacy and foreign policies. In the first field, common concerns involve the increase in the number of women coming into the diplomatic career, tackling barriers posed during their professional development within the foreign ministry, and the quest for more representation in positions of power; in the second, the dissemination of views that aim to deal with the structural causes of gender inequality. The typically political “art of possible”, also when

applied to foreign policy, shows ambiguities and even a certain degree of inconsistency between discourse and practice. There is no doubt, however, that the adopted measures are in line with the changes necessary for the promotion of more gender equality, as will be shown below.

## Sweden

The origins of the phenomenon of feminist foreign policy, which appeared for the first time in Sweden, in 2014, are intertwined with the women, peace and security agenda in the United Nations. This agenda was inaugurated in the year 2000, with the adoption by the United Nations Security Council of Resolution 1325, precisely titled “Women, Peace and Security”, as well as the inclusion of a corresponding item in the body’s working program. The resolution in question recognizes the impact of armed conflict in the lives of girls and women, and it is aimed at their protection and participation in peace agreements. In general terms, the agenda includes female participation in politics, female diplomats’ engagement in defense and security issues, inclusion of women in mediation and negotiation of peace agreements, in post-conflict (including economic) reconstruction, among many other dimensions of war, including preventing and overcoming it.

Minister Margot Wallström bore that in mind when, in 2014, she became a pioneer in announcing the *Swedish feminist foreign policy*. Wallström had been the first person to serve as Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, between 2010 and 2012, an experience that allowed her to know in depth the particularities of the violence to which women and girls are submitted in situations of conflict. During her time in office as foreign affairs minister and vice-prime minister of Sweden (2014-2019), the country integrated, in a systematic and cross-sectional manner, the gender perspective into foreign policy, aiming to achieve results that would make a difference in people’s reality by strengthening three main dimensions: the three Rs - rights, representation and resources for women and girls. These three dimensions and their implications are described in detail in a feminist foreign policy handbook that became a reference on the subject, and whose preface clarifies not only the women, peace and security agenda, but also the idea that promoting gender equality benefits the whole of society, not only women:

We have championed issues relating to women, peace and security within the UN Security Council (...). Research shows that gender equal societies enjoy better health, stronger economic growth and higher security. It also shows that gender equality contributes to peace, and that peace negotiations in which women have taken part have a better chance of being sustainable (Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Sweden 2019).

A recent study on female representation in diplomacy places Sweden, along with Canada, as the country with the highest number of female ambassadors and heads of mission, having reached 50% (Chehab 2022). It is important to point out that this rate is only 15% worldwide (Towns and Niklasson 2017, 529).

Sweden's feminist foreign policy, although cutting-edge and pioneering, has not been free of criticism. There are different levels of criticism with regards to the silencing of historical causes within women's social movements, especially those pertaining disarmament and demilitarization (Otto 2009; Federici 2019). This criticism is directly targeted at arms exports (Acheson and Butler 2019). Some critics also claim that the focus of the Swedish feminist foreign policy is too limited, since it is binary and ciscentric (Zilla 2022). The recent formation of a government coalition led by the far-right raised doubts on the longevity of this policy: some statements suggested that Sweden would stop using the label "feminist" in its foreign policy, although gender equality should remain a central value for Sweden and its government (Supremo Tribunal Federal 2022). In the months to come, it would be important to examine closely the impacts of the new government guidelines on the content of feminist foreign policy.

## Germany

In December 2021, with the rise to power of a coalition between the social democrats, greens and liberals, Germany became part of the group of countries adopting a *feminist foreign policy*. Annalena Baerbock, the first woman (and youngest person, at 40 years old) to take office in the Auswärtig Amt – AA, the German Foreign Ministry, as well as Sveja Shulze, Minister for Economic Cooperation, have been highlighting the feminist nature of both Germany's foreign policy and political cooperation. On loan from the Swedish model, Germany uses the three Rs – rights, resources and representation – to strengthen women and marginalized groups, but it adds a fourth letter, D, for Diversity (3R+D), therefore adopting a broader view (Zilla 2022). Similar to the Swedish model, the German model posits that feminism benefits the whole of society, which makes it necessary to engage all parties; it is not a "policy from women for women", which is supposedly why the chancellor delegated the responsibility of executing the feminist foreign policy in the AA to a man (Ministério das Relações Exteriores 2022a).

According to information collected by the Brazilian embassy in Berlin, the main focus of the German feminist foreign policy is to increase the number of women in positions of power, since only 23.5% of German ambassadors and heads of mission are women. The AA has been delving into the root causes that hinder the rise of female diplomats through the ranks, such as the challenges of balancing family life with a career, and has been developing measures to mitigate such difficulties, like the possibility of remote work, job sharing for diplomat couples, as well as the broadening of bilateral agreements that allow dependents of diplomats to work abroad. In terms of foreign action lines, the German cooperation policy has been focusing on suppressing discriminatory laws in cooperating countries, as well as promoting measures that ensure more representation and legal support for women and girls (Ministério das Relações Exteriores 2022b).

Both in the case of Sweden and Germany, as well as in other Western liberal democracies that have been adopting feminist foreign policies, there are criticisms regarding the use of the feminist agenda as a mere way to strengthen middle powers' soft power in the international system

(Aggestam and True 2020, 156). There are also criticisms on the possible imperialist inclination: Zilla (2022) argues that, when based on so-called “universal” liberal perceptions, which often ignore specific cultural contexts, such policies may give way to this understanding. With regards to such criticism, it should be pointed out that the Minister for Economic Cooperation, when questioned whether the imposition of certain values as a condition for cooperation could be seen as a colonialist measure, reaffirmed the terms of the 2030 Agenda, which were endorsed by the international community, as pillars to the German policy; on the other side, she did mention the need not to leave empty spaces that could be filled by “countries with other value systems, such as Russia and China” (Ministério das Relações Exteriores 2022c).

## Spain

A woman seven months pregnant reviews troops that salute her – the image of Carme Chacón, right after she took office in April 2008 as Spain’s Defense Minister, went around the world, and it is remembered as emblematic of female empowerment.<sup>2</sup> Socialist José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero was at the start of his second term as Spain’s Prime Minister, and for the first time women were the majority in the cabinet. One year before, in 2007, Spain had adopted the Effective Equality between Women and Men Law<sup>3</sup>, which started a feminist path that has not seen many setbacks, even in subsequent, more conservative governments. In fact, since 2004, when the Zapatero government began, Spain has gone through an inner journey that could be called feminist. The current government, headed by socialist Pedro Sánchez since 2019, calls itself so and has been adopting feminist policies, including the announcement that it too was putting a *feminist foreign policy* into practice.

Internally, Spain has reached a record of female representation: in the ministerial cabinet, there are currently fourteen women and ten men. All three of the country’s vice-presidents are women. The sexual and reproductive health and voluntary interruption of pregnancy law, from 2010, was amended and will soon be examined in the House of Representatives. The norm is unprecedented as it recognizes situations of female vulnerability and ensures specific rights, such as paid medical leave for painful menstruation (“menstrual health”). Very recently, a law passed that was called “*solo sí es sí*”, which does not provide for the use of force or even the victim’s resistance to constitute a sexual assault, and it includes new criminal offences, such as “street harassment”, “sexual femicide” and “digital sexual violence”.

The foreign aspect of these internal policies has been the recent and unfinished attempt to constitute a foreign policy that can be called feminist which pushes gender equality in foreign actions. During a visit to the new Colombian government (Petro-Francia), the head of the Spanish

<sup>2</sup> Socialist Catalan politician of great significance, Carme Chacón (1971-2017) was Spain’s Minister of Defense between 2008 and 2011, the first woman to hold this office.

<sup>3</sup> Lei Orgânica 3/2007, From 22 March 2007. Accessed: September 02, 2022. <https://www.boe.es/buscar/pdf/2007/BOE-A-2007-6115-consolidado.pdf>

government referenced the commitment of both countries to gender parity in their cabinets, lauding the unprecedented parity in the Colombian government, and mentioned Spain's commitment to the issue in its foreign policy (Sánchez 2022).

The guidelines of Spain's feminist foreign policy were drafted during the term of chancellor Arantxa González Laya (January 2020 to July 2021), and a feminist foreign action guide was released in early 2021 (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación 2021). The goal is to coordinate internal policies, where Spain has been advancing significantly, to the country's foreign actions, based on the law whose preamble provides for the equality between men and women and the fight against gender violence<sup>4</sup>. Since 2007, the Spanish Foreign Ministry has had an ambassador for the promotion of gender equality.

In general terms, Spain's feminist foreign policy is structured around axes that aim to cross-section the issue gender into other areas, similar to the Swedish feminist foreign policy. There are five central principles: transformative approach; committed leadership; ownership; inclusive participation and fostering alliances; intersectionality and diversity (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación 2021).

A more careful look at reality shows advances, but also the persistence of many challenges. Spanish women, who until 1970 were not allowed into the diplomatic career, currently account for 28% of diplomats, according to the president of the Spanish Women Diplomats Association (Gómez 2021). Advances in admission are ongoing, without the adoption of affirmative policies: in 2017, women accounted for 40% of total admissions, while in 2019 they were 44%, and, for the first time, in 2021, they reached full parity in admissions to the diplomatic career (Albares 2021). The percentage of women heads of missions increased from 14 to 21% between January 2020 and January 2021, according to data released by the guide on feminist foreign policy.

Data from March 2022 (Chehab 2022) show that this percentage is currently 26.7% – still below the percentage of women in the career (28%). What catches the eye is actually the fact that the guide (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores, Unión Europea y Cooperación 2021) commits to the target of 25% of female heads of mission – also below the 28%. The guide states that there is only one female ambassador in a G20 country and establishes the target of 15% by the end of the current Spanish legislature (December 2023, unless exceptional situations occur). A 2021 Court of Accounts report warned for the first time of the existence of an income gap of 37% between male and female diplomats resulting from that fact that the latter only hold 35% of posts abroad, where compensation is higher (González 2021). There are no women ahead of embassies in G7 countries, and there has never been a female ambassador in Paris, London, Washington, the European Union, NATO or the UN (Gómez 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Lei 2/2014, de la Acción y del Servicio Exterior del Estado. Accessed September 01, 2022. <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2014/03/26/pdfs/BOE-A-2014-3248.pdf>

## Chile

In our region, Chile is taking tangible and coherent steps, a country with the first self-described feminist government in Latin America. The feminist claims were central to the popular mobilization that led to the “*estallido*” in 2019, and were incorporated into the new government, which was inaugurated in March 2022. Similar to Spain, president Gabriel Boric Font’s cabinet includes more women than men. For the first time, Chile has a woman ahead of the Ministry of the Interior and Security, as well as in the prominent positions of government spokesperson and Defense Minister. Internally, the country has been advancing in adopting impactful measures, such as the parenting responsibility act and obligation to pay alimony, besides the “*Chile para Todas*”, which includes cross-sectional measures targeted at alleviating the extra burden of care labor imposed on women (Gobierno de Chile 2022).

In an article discussing institutional gender barriers in the Chilean foreign policy, Escobar and Cook (2022) highlight the advances obtained during Michelle Bachelet’s presidencies (2006-2010; 2014-2018), when the government adopted parity in the cabinet for the first time and the issue began mobilizing presidential diplomacy itself. On the other hand, the country had not advanced in regards to representation abroad, without any female ambassadors in prominent posts. There were still barriers such as the infantilization of young female diplomats and the invisibilization of the gender issue in places of power within the foreign ministry.

In December 2021, the recently elected president Boric announced the country would adopt a feminist foreign policy. After seven months of the new government taking office, which took place in March 2022, Chile has, for the first time, two women in the two highest-ranking positions in the foreign ministry: minister and vice-minister. In few months, the percentage of female ambassadors went from thirteen to 24, quickly reaching 27%, a figure similar to the percentage of women in the career. According to chancellor Antonia Urrejola, there are 466 diplomats, of which 129 are women (27.7%); 86 ambassadors, of which 27.9% are women (Espinosa 2022). The country has been trying to select women in equal number to men in the career’s admission; for such, a woman was appointed to head the diplomatic academy for the first time, since it was found that until few years ago women were embarrassed by sexist and discriminatory question during oral interviews (Espinosa 2022). Female ambassadors were appointed to central posts, such as the Chilean missions to the United Nations (both Geneva and New York), the WTO, the European Union, besides bilateral posts such as Argentina, Germany, Cuba, the United Kingdom and Portugal.

It is important to highlight that the current feminist perspective in the Chilean foreign policy is deeply connected to the environmental issue, to the “turquoise” that defines it: the mixture of the blue found in the oceans and the green in the forests and the climate change agenda. Gender is adopted cross-sectionally in all initiatives and approaches, and the quest to ensure the presence of women in decision-making levels is a key element. Chile has recently proposed an important

initiative: a book that aims to place the issue of gender inequality in foreign policies in Latin America and the region's chanceries (Fuentes-Julio et al. 2022).

Although feminist movements have been present and active in Latin America, little is known about the low female representation in foreign policy and decision making in Latin American countries. Most research on the subject focuses on the United States northern Europe or Australia (Fuentes-Julio and López 2022). Support to the formation and consolidation of research and action networks on the subject seem, therefore, instrumental for its advance. As of these networks, it will be more viable to place the issue in light of the peculiarities of our societies and the place women hold in them – a territory strongly marked by colonialism, patriarchy, sexism and racism. This heritage and this circumstance are approached in more detail below, when examining the case of Brazil.

## Approaching the case of Brazil

Ideally, feminist foreign policies should be the projection, into the international stage, of state and government policies aimed at gender equality. We should look into the case of Brazil starting from the caption of article 5 of the 1988 Federal Constitution:

All people are equal before the law, without any distinction whatsoever. Brazilians and foreigners residing in the country are ensured the inviolability of their right to life, liberty, equality, security, and property, under the following terms

The Constitution grants Brazil great legitimacy of principles to promote gender equality in the international stage. The real situation of women in national territory, in terms of security and autonomy, on the other hand, makes it very difficult to conceive that the country could apply a feminist foreign policy. Legally ensured equality is one thing. A whole other is the challenge of understanding that gender inequalities are still reproduced today based on the biological differences between the sexes (Miguel and Biroli 2014, 164).

Many advances can be highlighted with regard to legal solutions. We have, for example, robust legislation against domestic violence and femicide. In representative politics, while women have had the right to vote for ninety years as of 2022, female candidacies to parliament have been receiving incentives since 1997 by means of the obligation from each party or coalition to have a minimum 30% of candidates from each gender (Law No. 9.504, improved in 2009 by Law No. 12.034). However, we should also point out that the 1916 Civil Code was only formally revoked in 2002; this piece of legislation included, among other anachronistic provisions, that the man was the head of the marital unit, thus being responsible for authorizing women to practice a profession, receive inheritance, etc. And only in 2022 did the Federal Senate revoke the need for the husband to authorize the woman to undergo tubal ligation.

## Features of a patriarchal society

Ensuring the full emancipation of Brazilian women requires, besides laws, public policies sustained throughout time. But this is not the case. The budget to prevent violence against women was subjected to drastic cuts in the past years (Dourado 2022) despite the alarming increase in the level of violence, especially during social isolation imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

According to the 2015 Violence Map, one Brazilian woman is assassinated every two hours, which makes Brazil the country with the 5th highest homicide rate for women. The same survey points out that one woman is raped every eleven minutes in Brazil. According to a survey conducted in 2015, more than half of femicides are committed by family members, and 33% by current or ex partners (Waiselfisz 2015).

When taking the racial factor into account, the situation is even more bleak: while the murder of black women increased 54% between 2003 and 2013, homicide of white women decreased 9.8% (Waiselfisz 2015). Furthermore, violence against the LGBTQIA+ community in Brazil occurs in higher rates than in countries that still criminalize homosexuality. In 2021, 38% of all murders of trans people in the world happened in Brazil (Associação, 2022). In this scenario, the majority of victims are trans women who are also black, poor and marginalized (Observatório de Mortes e Violências LGBTI+ no Brasil 2020).

When approaching gender violence in Latin America, Rita Laura Segato speaks of a *war against women*, which originates from the common heritage of Republics founded on the sexist, misogynous, homophobic and racist colonial order, with great contempt for knowledges and practices of native peoples. Against any initiative to subvert this order, a “militant patriarchal fanaticism” is imposed, which the author recognizes in the case of Brazil (Segato 2019). According to the scholar, only this heritage can explain the leniency of Latin American states with such alarming rates of violence against women, in fights between criminal organizations, political disputes or domestically, which persists side by side with a supposed modernization.

From the economic standpoint, gender inequality still prevails. Despite the policies to fight poverty previously implemented in the country, women are the majority in lower income brackets, among those who receive less than one minimum wage per month. On the other hand, although they have been the majority of university graduates for decades, they receive around 30% less than men for the same job. Racism also imposes on gender: black women’s income is 44% lower than those of white women, and they are the majority of precarious labor, especially domestic labor (Pinheiro and Rezende n.d.).

In parallel, there is the attempt, sponsored by government authorities, to restrict women’s access to medical services in cases of interruption of pregnancy authorized by law. The lack of normative advances in the area of sexual and reproductive rights, besides being a breach of women’s basic rights, according to the Supreme Federal Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal 2019), stands out as a symbol of health inequality in the country (Cardoso et al. 2020). While high-income women and teenagers have access to safe interruption of pregnancy in private

clinics in Brazil or neighboring countries that do not criminalize this practice, those with low levels of education, black, brown and indigenous women are the majority of fatal victims of the half million underground abortions that are estimated to take place annually in the country (Instituto de Bioética 2019).

There are deep historical roots for the subordination to men and the racial hierarchy that is superimposed to the acceptance of state supervision of the body of Brazilian women. They relate to the lack of opportunities, including of education, and to financial resources, besides the lack of autonomy in some cases. One of the ways to achieve sustainable actions to combat this situation is women's political participation.

The right to vote, which was granted in 1932 and turned women into the majority of voters, has not been translated into occupation of more elective positions. This matters because the agendas embraced by women broaden the scope of issues taken into account by parliament. Furthermore, female lawmakers propose different solutions from those thought out by men for the same problem (United Nations 2002 127).

Brazil ranks 145 among 190 national parliaments when the presence of women is concerned, with only 14.8% of congresspersons and 17.3% of senators (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016). Once again, black and brown women are faced with the most difficulties: only around 2% of federal congresspersons and 1% of senators in Brazil identify as black (Mulheres Negras Decidem 2022). Only in 2018 was the first indigenous congresswoman elected (Xavier 2018).

The legislation that provides for a minimum percentage of female candidacies does not prevent them from receiving little to no financing, which, in practice, makes their candidacy impossible. The Direct Action of Unconstitutionality No. 5.617 was presented on these grounds, which resulted in the assignment of at least 30% of funds from the National Party Fund to the campaign of female candidates in 2018. Furthermore, National Congress is assessing a bill aimed at ensuring the candidacy of women with proven intention to hold public office, so as to avoid "decoy" candidacies and other frauds in the application of the quota (Bill No. 1.541/2019).

Besides numerical representation, an additional challenge is to ensure women positions of command, so that they can influence the agenda and decisions. During the entire history of Brazil, congresswomen and senators were part of legislative steering committees and, at best, chaired a couple of sessions during the absence of the titular member, but they were never the presidents of legislative houses. In parliamentary commissions, presidencies are almost exclusively held by men. In 2021, for the first time, Senator Kátia Abreu presided the Foreign Relations and National Defense Commission.

The violence to which women who hold public office in Brazil were subjected has escalated to the point that it led, in 2021, to a new criminal type in the Electoral Code (art. 326-B). Although men are also the target of political violence, women who hold elective office are a target of sexual stereotypes aimed at diminishing their intellectual ability and the use of intimidation through threats of rape and physical violence. As a tributary of gender violence in general, political violence

against women traces back to deep-rooted social practices that requires criminal liability to be solved, in addition to actions to promote the role of women in politics.<sup>5</sup>

After more than two decades since the adoption of candidacy quotas, and in addition to the fact that the results remain far from what was initially intended, the issue of low representation of feminist claims in Brazil's political agenda is still present, even among elected women. Some federal congresswomen even proposed, in 2020, a bill to extinguish the quotas that benefited them (Said 2020).

We should, therefore, reflect whether the representation for which we are striving is that of women, or of women who fight for the rights of women. There being absolutely no consensus on the subject, the growth of conservative women elected to parliament for both houses is evident. According to the electronic observatory "Women in Congress", in the past legislature, congresswomen acted in 34.4% of bills against the women's rights in issues such as violence against women, as well as health, economic and labor issues (Belin 2022). Although it is not strictly necessary for the approval of foreign policy guidelines, broad support seems paramount for the maintenance of feminist foreign policies.<sup>6</sup>

As seen in the first part of this article, a common component to self-described feminist foreign policies is the search for parity in the diplomatic career: this seems to be the requirement for its existence. Since chanceries are the main institutions responsible for countries' foreign policies, it makes sense that female representation in these government bodies be the main concern in policies that intend to be feminist. We will see below the situation of women at Itamaraty, in order to understand what are the challenges that a possible Brazilian feminist foreign policy would face.

## Women in Brazilian diplomacy

In 2016, women accounted for 22.9% of Brazilian diplomats. In October 2020, this was exactly the same. Women are currently 23% of total (Ministério das Relações Exteriores 2022d). This means that in six years there was no increase in the percentage of women in the Brazilian diplomatic career.

Farias and Carmo (2016) judge that female representation among diplomats is stagnant. They calculate that if the same rhythm of women's admission between 1954 and 2010 is maintained,

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<sup>5</sup> Although this is not at all a problem exclusive to the Brazilian reality. In a study conducted in 2016 with congresswomen from 39 countries in five large geographic regions, 80% of the interviewees reported having suffered psychological violence, and 44.5% suffered threats of death, rape, lynching or kidnapping during their terms in office. According to the study (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2016), the major risk factors for political violence against women are: being affiliated to a party that is in opposition to the government; being young; and belonging to a discriminated ethnic-racial group.

<sup>6</sup> In Mexico, years before the adoption of López Obrador's feminist foreign policy, they already strove for numerical parity, also in leadership positions, in the national parliament. In 2009, Mexican female parliamentarians mobilized against the practice of assigning the seat of elected women, among the 40% quota established in 2006, to their male deputies. This episode became known as the "Juanitas Scandal". In consequence, in 2014, Mexico passed the gender parity bill for the legislative and, in May 2020, the Mexican Senate approved the constitutional reform called "Parity in Everything", valid for agencies in all three branches of government and in all three administrative levels of the Mexican state.

parity will be reached at Itamaraty in 2066. In order to accelerate this process, some chanceries have been adopting measures. According to researchers:

In the Finnish foreign service, 40% top-down quotas were established. In others, they use the term “targets”. Denmark has imposed a 40% quota for female ambassadors. In the British foreign service, in an initiative launched in 2008, they strove for a 50% target in the recruitment process and 28% in leadership positions. Furthermore, in case women and men compete for the same position, the spot is given to the woman until the gender gap disappears. In France, Sauvadet Law mobilized its diplomacy to introduce targets for the occupation of 40% in all levels of the career – the ministry established a 50% target upon recruitment (Farias and Carmo 2016).

Similar to other chanceries, Itamaraty also presents lower female participation in higher positions in the career, as well as in leadership positions. In fact, in May 2022, women were only 12.2% of heads of diplomatic posts abroad. At the time this article is being finalized, in November 2022, there are no women among the seven secretaries, a position equivalent to vice-minister, at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – MRE.

The only known institutional action taken to stimulate female candidates to take the Diplomatic Career Entrance Examination promoted by MRE was the campaign “More Woman Diplomats”. This was a series of sixteen testimonials of female diplomats, from different hierarchical levels, released in the Ministry’s YouTube channel and social media, between June 2018 and February 2019.

However, similar to what has occurred in other chanceries, Brazilian female diplomats have been organizing independently. In 2013, a private discussion group on social media was created.<sup>7</sup> In few weeks, more than 150 diplomats were debating different issues of common interest. This was the first time in almost one hundred years since women have been a part of the Brazilian diplomatic career that such contact was established (Nogueira and Balbino 2018; Friaça 2018).

In 2014, female diplomats decided to provide a collective answer to an internal survey from then chancellor Luiz Alberto Figueiredo Machado, through a document they called “Letter from Women Diplomats”. The compilation of fourteen suggestions was subscribed by 203 female diplomats – “which makes this initiative the largest political mobilization in the history of Brazilian foreign service thus far” (Farias and Carmo 2016). Among the requests are the creation of a Gender and Race Managing Committee, created in September 2014 and dissolved in September 2020; the Commission to Prevent and Confront Moral and Sexual Harassment and Discrimination, created in November 2017; and the guidebook “Moral Harassment, Sexual Harassment and Discrimination in the Work Environment”, released by the Commission in 2018 and accessible only via the Ministry’s intranet.

<sup>7</sup> In the United States, an affinity group was formed, called *Executive Women at State*; in France, the *Association Femme et diplomatie*; in Argentina, the *Red de Diplomáticas Argentinas*, among others.

Some of the most relevant results obtained by the Women Diplomat Group, which currently includes around one third of the total 354 female diplomats, occurred around the celebration of one hundred years since the first woman was admitted to the Brazilian diplomatic career, in 2018. With support from the Alexandre de Gusmão Foundation – FUNAG, female diplomats organized the event “Maria José de Castro Rebello: a century of woman diplomats at Itamaraty”. (Ministério das Relações Exteriores do Brasil 2018). Also on the occasion of the anniversary, they shot a documentary called “Exteriors – Brazilian women in diplomacy”, the result of a crowdfunding campaign and the support of the Brazilian Diplomats Association – ADB. Also in December of the same year, then chancellor Aloysio Nunes named Annex I of MRE “Maria José de Castro Rebello Mendes Annex”.

It should be pointed out that, were it not for the women’s mobilization, the anniversary would have gone by without any news or celebration. Maria José de Castro Rebello was, in 1918, the first known Brazilian woman to be admitted through federal public examination – admitted in first place. Her confirmation to the position of diplomat was severely questioned, and counted with a favorable legal opinion from Rui Barbosa, a famous Brazilian legal scholar (Friaça 2018). Despite the obvious potential for institutional marketing and the urgency of the subject, MRE did not plan for any publicity activities for the occasion.

The episode is indicative of how women remain invisible in the history and the image promoted by the ministry, which can lead to the conclusion that diplomacy is not a place for women. There is not a single portrait of a woman among the 107 that adorn the vestibules of authorities at the Itamaraty Palace, in Brasília, since no woman has ever held such high positions (Faria and Faleiro 2022). Among all South American countries, only Brazil has never had a woman hold the office of Minister of Foreign Affairs or secretary-general, the second highest position in the foreign ministry’s hierarchy. Brazil has also never had a woman head the embassies of Buenos Aires, Washington, Beijing or Tokyo (Bernardo 2022).

According to a survey made by Faria and Faleiro (2022), there is a certain stability in the difference between women’s applications and admissions in the Diplomatic Career Entrance Examination. Between 2004 and 2020, women’s applications remained steady at around 40% of total. Admissions, however, were around 24% of total, varying year by year between 1996 and 2021. On this subject, the authors emphasize:

This realization makes one think of the need for concrete actions that not only give visibility to women who are already diplomats, but also allow more women to become diplomats. This is the spirit and the letter if the recently approved (by consensus) resolution of the UN General Assembly, which established June 24 as the International Day for Women in Diplomacy and reaffirmed that “the participation of women, on equal terms with men and at all levels of decision-making, is essential to the achievement of sustainable development, peace and democracy” (Faria and Faleiro 2022)<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> United Nations (2022).

If, on the contrary, women are kept invisible both at the Ministry's headquarters and the most prominent posts, the vicious cycle is confirmed, which exemplifies what Rezende calls the naturalization of inequalities. According to the author, the low percentage of women in structures of power should not be seen as the results of individual choices, but associated to structural arrangements that end up establishing "places for women" (Rezende n.d., 6). In the case of the diplomatic career, if they do not identify with the male model of success and do not count on the same family support men do to be admitted into an institution that seems to be made by and for men, women continue to be admitted as a minority, to hold fewer leadership positions and fewer positions of power to exact changes that could break this cycle definitively.

In addition to the low female representation at Itamaraty, we should point out what Selis and Prado (2021) call a rupture in Brazil's foreign policy agenda with regards to gender. If, between 2000 and 2016, the Brazilian foreign policy has echoed demands from civil society through participation in conventions, committees and discussion forums on the subject, what we currently see is "[...] a sort of anti-politics also in the international arena, anchored on the deconstruction of rights and the emptying of discussions on multilateral forums" (Selis and Prado 2021). Any feminist foreign policy that Brazil may follow in the future begins with the need to rebuild credibility on the subject.

## A possible Brazilian feminist foreign policy

Foreign policy is a component of public policy; therefore, it is linked directly to other sectoral public policies. It should not dissociate from them, at the risk of projecting a foreign image that does not conform to the reality of the population it represents. Therefore, gender inequality, in addition to the elevation of feminism to a contentious level in politics, are factors that make the idea of adopting a feminist foreign policy in the short-term unrealistic.

It is first and foremost necessary, in line with the experience of the countries that were studied in the first part of this article, to advance internally and cross-sectionally with regards to diversity, gender and race equality, and to combat the situation of violence, subordination and discrimination. This is the systemic condition to allow us to conceive a feminist foreign policy in Brazil. Without this condition, we are at serious risk of promoting a mere rhetorical exercise, or worse, instrumentalizing the just aspirations of women's social movements. We want to avoid that the Brazilian case repeats the criticism posed, with different levels of emphasis, to basically all governments that claimed to have adopted a feminist foreign policy, aiming to avoid incoherencies.

The minimum requirements of a feminist foreign policy should be the establishment of quotas for women in positions within the diplomatic career and the improvement of women's rights, through the goal shared by the entire government, not only diplomacy, to promote gender equality (Hudson and Eason 2019). It is possible to take immediate steps in Brazil "within", towards a

more equitable diplomacy, through actions, including quotas, aimed at parity, both numerical and qualitative, in the foreign ministry, with a view to race and gender diversity. Then, there should be a second movement, “without”, towards a feminist policy, through the promotion of women’s emancipation, in a *descolonial*<sup>9</sup>, non-binary, antiracist perspective in the relations established with countries, as well as regional and international organizations in all sectors.

With regards to the first movement, it is urgent to break the barrier of gender insensitivity. While the uncritical repetition of the idea that meritocracy suffices remains, we will never overcome inequality in the search for positions and ascension in the job market, politics and diplomacy. There is enough knowledge available to show that structural inequalities regarding race, gender or others, whether in the public or private environments, are only overcome through actions targeted at levelling out the conditions for competition. Without this, it is not possible to talk about meritocracy, only the reproduction of privileges.

In this regard, we should highlight that the mantra “more women in politics” means necessarily fewer men in this limited space. Although more participation of women in politics will certainly revert to broader agendas, for the benefit of the of the entire population, it is undeniable that this is also a dispute for spaces of power. We should recognize that resistance is mainly due to this fact.

Notwithstanding, resistance should not guide the decisions on gender equality and parity. The abolition of slavery and the women’s right to vote are examples of civilizational milestones that were achieved, in Brazil and in other countries, despite ferocious opposition. More recently, if the consent of the white population were required, the legislation imposing racial quotas in entrance examinations for universities and the public service never would have passed. Therefore, it makes no sense to argue for the lack of consensus as a justification not to adopt compensation measures.

In truth, even when compared to countries that face similar challenges, Brazil stands out negatively due to the fact that it has never had a woman ahead of its foreign ministry, or in diplomatic posts that are considered relevant for the country. Furthermore, data regarding the underrepresentation in the admission to leadership positions point to a serious situation that demands solid measures, provided for in a written document elaborated by the administration, without which it is incoherent to defend a self-described feminist foreign policy.

At the example of countries that have already adopted compensatory legislation and/or policies for women in the foreign service, we think of a minimum level of promotion of women in all levels and, eventually, reserved positions for female candidates. Such mechanisms could be established, at the example of racial quotas, for a certain period of time, after which its impact would be assessed and the need to maintain it would be reconsidered.

Another front would be to fight the assumption that women diplomats are more “naturally” skilled for certain areas, such as consular services and educational and social issues. At the same

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<sup>9</sup> Just like Tania Rivera, we chose the Portuguese term “*descolonial*” because we agree with her that it is contradictory to adopt an anglicism “to name an attempt to break with the colonization of thought” (Rivera 2020, 13).

time, they have been historically absent from departments in Brasília and posts abroad that are responsible for issues of defense and security, terrorism, disarmament, international law, commerce and other so-called “high politics” issues.

There are precedents for the correction of such distortions. For example, during the implementation of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, in 2019 MRE committed to goals regarding customary foreign policy actions for the agenda’s internal release and implementation. Some examples include: conducting at least one class per year on the agenda in the diplomatic academy, the Rio Branco Institute; including mentions to the agenda in interventions carried out by Brazil in the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission; aiming to assign 50% of women in the United Nations Department;<sup>10</sup> aiming to assign delegations for international meetings on peace and security with at least 25% of women during a one-year period.

With regards to the movement “without”, after overcoming the participation in “anti-gender” alliances (Selis and Prado 2021), it is possible to think of an original Brazilian project for the international debate on feminist foreign policies. The power of Lélia Gonzalez’s (1988) concept of *Amefricanity* could be a starting point in Brazil’s contribution to articulate the *descolonial* and non-binary thought, antiracism, and the recognition of knowledges and ways of life of native peoples in the Global South, to the international feminist struggle – which remains imprisoned by Eurocentric financing and views.

This could find expression in new foreign policy projects or the support to ongoing initiatives. A Brazilian foreign policy focusing on gender should, for example, reflect on the evolution of the quality of life of women in countries that receive cooperation from Brazil, so as to favor the overcoming of discriminatory cultural standards, aiming not only to remedy sexual and domestic violence, but also to change the social and cultural tissue. According to this line of thought, women’s engagement would be necessary in all decision-making instances – from the drafting of public policies to their planning and monitoring.

Some concrete possibilities include: establishing privileged access to women on projects and financing sponsored by Brazil in third countries; fomenting institutional support for the drafting of texts and amendments to the constitution that promote rights equality, including the prohibition of forced marriages, infibulation and other mutilation practices; supporting measures to increase women’s participation in public institutions, as well as police repression and judicial liability for crimes of sexual violence and domestic violence, among others. The sharing of mechanisms for tackling violence against women and femicide could also be encouraged. The *Disque 180* Hotline, for example, is operated in sixteen foreign countries, and this experience could be spread.

The experience of women in the Specialized Meeting for Family Agriculture – REAF should be recovered and enhanced. Silva and Castro (2022) highlight the role of the gender working group in this meeting that involved the participation of peasant leaderships in MERCOSUR.

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<sup>10</sup> Current International Organizations Department.

Challenges such as the lack of economic autonomy, the patriarchy and violence against women have stood out. As the researchers have concluded:

The REAF's gender agenda was built in intense dialogue between governments and social organizations, which confirms the literature's suppositions that the Meeting was one of the best - if not the best - example of a participative space in MERCOSUR. The demands from movements were slowly incorporated and produced significant results in terms of MERCOSUR norms for member countries, exchanges, coordination networks between social movements in Latin America and the diffusion of the rural women's agenda in other regional forums, such as FAO and CELAC (Silva and Castro 2022, 119).

## Conclusion

Based on the experiences of some countries that adopted feminist foreign policies, we can conclude that an announcement of this sort from Brazil would depend on the resumption of foreign action aimed at the promotion of gender equality, combined with policies to resolve the huge inequality to which Brazilian women are subjected in national territory – including those who aim to go into and progress their diplomatic careers. Once the decision has been made to pursue a foreign policy aimed at gender equality, it can be argued that Brazil could offer specific contributions to the global construction of the concept of feminist foreign policies, giving voice to the viewpoints of developing countries with gender, ethnic, class and non-binary perspectives.

The foreign ministry must take immediate steps towards parity, in view of the alarming rates of gender inequality put forth in this article. Establishing a minimum level of promotions in all classes and placement of diplomats as heads in relevant diplomatic posts, within the foreign ministry and abroad, is an urgent matter. Such measures will allow women to be contemplated, above all in positions of power, so that we can walk towards naturalizing the view that women can and should be whatever we want – including diplomats. The adoption of quotas for women could be envisioned, so as to ensure the correction and reparation of a reality that is currently very far removed from that of Brazilian society. Itamaraty and Brazilian diplomacy must and deserve to have the face of women as well.

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