

The Janus Face of AMLO's Feminist Foreign Policy: Rhetoric Abroad, Patriarchal Realities at Home

El rostro de Jano de la política exterior feminista de AMLO: retórica en el exterior, realidades patriarcales en el interior

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Abstract

Mexico has been embracing the Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) practice narrative since 2020 under the populist leadership of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). However, the general pattern of countries with an FFP agenda is generally ranked higher in the gender equality index globally. In this case, Mexico proves to be divergent by embracing FFP while sitting in the middle rank of the gender equality index. This article examines those paradoxes of Mexico's FFP by arguing that the decision to cast an FFP narrative is rooted in the populist agenda of President AMLO rather than a strategic and ideological projection of the nation. Through qualitative document analysis and leadership personality theory, the study reveals a performative dimension to Mexico's FFP: high-level female appointments and global feminist discourse are juxtaposed with domestic policies that marginalize feminist civil society, ignore femicide, and militarize public security. AMLO's leadership, rooted in a binary populist logic of "the people" vs. "the elite," casts feminist activists as political adversaries, impeding genuine gender equality. This research highlights the limitations of feminist branding within populist governance and advocates for a more profound alignment between discourse and transformative feminist praxis.

Resumen

Desde 2020, México ha adoptado la narrativa de la Política Exterior Feminista (PEF) bajo el liderazgo populista del presidente Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). Sin embargo, a diferencia de otros países que impulsan agendas de PEF y que suelen ocupar posiciones destacadas en los índices globales de igualdad de género, México representa una excepción al promover dicha política mientras se ubica en una posición intermedia en estos indicadores. Este artículo analiza las paradojas de la PEF mexicana, argumentando que su adopción obedece más a una estrategia discursiva del populismo de AMLO que a una proyección ideológica y estratégica del Estado mexicano. A partir de un análisis cualitativo de documentos y de la teoría de la personalidad del liderazgo, el estudio identifica un carácter performativo en la PEF: nombramientos femeninos de alto perfil y retórica feminista internacional que contrastan con políticas internas que marginan a la sociedad civil feminista, ignoran el feminicidio y militarizan la seguridad pública. El liderazgo de AMLO, anclado en una lógica populista binaria de "el pueblo" contra "la élite", sitúa a las activistas feministas como adversarias políticas, dificultando el avance hacia una igualdad de género sustantiva. La investigación destaca los límites del uso simbólico del feminismo en regímenes populistas y llama a una mayor coherencia entre el discurso oficial y una praxis feminista verdaderamente transformadora.

Keywords: Mexico, Feminist Foreign Policy, Populist, AMLO, Personality.

Palabras clave: México, política exterior feminista, populismo, AMLO, personalidad

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Introduction

Feminist foreign policy (FFP) is a political framework that focuses on the well-being of marginalized communities and embodies a self-reflection on the hierarchical system of global foreign policy. It is a multidimensional policy framework that aims to harness the experiences and agency of women and marginalized groups to challenge the destructive forces of patriarchy, colonization, heteronormativity, capitalism, racism, imperialism, and militarism (Joachim, 2022). Countries that embrace the idea of pursuing a feminist foreign policy tend to derive ethical impetus from the UN Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Agenda. Sweden has actively sought to adopt the principles of gender justice, peace, and security, as related to UN Security Council Resolution 1325, as the basis for its external actions (Aggestam et al., 2019). At the 74th UN General Assembly in September 2019, Foreign Secretary Marcelo Ebrard announced Mexico's decision to implement a feminist foreign policy, which was later introduced at the 31st Meeting of Ambassadors and Consuls in January 2020. This policy is grounded in five core principles aimed at addressing structural inequalities, gender disparities, and discrimination to foster a fairer and more inclusive society (Ebrard, 2019).

On the other hand, data from UN Women, Mexico, show 88.9% of legal frameworks that promote, enforce, and monitor gender equality under the SDG indicator, with a focus on violence against women, are in place. 20.7% of women aged 20–24 years old who were married or in a union before age 18. The adolescent birth rate is 44.1 per 1,000 women aged 15–19 as of 2020, up from 0.98 per 1,000 in 2019. As of February 2024, 50.4% of seats in parliament were held by women. As of Dec-20, only 63.9% of indicators needed to monitor the SDGs from a gender perspective were available, with gaps in key areas, in particular key labour market indicators, such as the gender pay gap. In addition, many areas such as gender and poverty, physical and sexual harassment, women's access to assets (including land), and gender and the environment lack comparable methodologies for regular monitoring. Closing these gender data gaps is essential for achieving gender-related SDG commitments in Mexico. In Mexico, there were 3,825 women murdered; 1,006 of them were femicide victims. For Mexico, the FFP supports its ambitions as a regional leader and adds credibility to its domestic fight against femicide. Mexico's FFP encompasses five priority areas: a feminist approach in all areas of foreign policy, achieving equality, gender equality in the foreign ministry,

combating gender-based violence, and a cross-sectoral approach to foreign policy (Zhukova et al., 2022).

Mexico was the first country in the Southern Hemisphere to adopt a feminist foreign policy and has made building international peace and security a hallmark of its government. At a press conference on August 20, 2024, led by President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO), Foreign Minister Alicia Bárcena discussed the current administration's foreign policy, which is guided by the Mexican Humanist Model. This model places people at the center, addressing the needs of all Mexicans, both in Mexico and abroad, to contribute to a more just, stable, and peaceful development system (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2024). Mexico, despite adopting a feminist foreign policy in 2020, still lags far behind in the WPS Index, ranking 142nd with a score of 0.551. This shows that despite policies to promote gender equality, Mexico still faces significant challenges, including high rates of gender-based violence, low access to justice for women, and systemic barriers to women's political participation (Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security & The Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2023).

The Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, or SRE) website lists and briefly describes the pillars of its feminist foreign policy. However, the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs fails to explain how it will achieve each of these goals or how they will measure success. Furthermore, no formal official document, policy roadmap, or white paper outlines specific policy actions, indicators, or goals. What is particularly concerning about Mexico's FFP is that it does not include substantive representation or participation of Mexican feminist civil society organizations. It also does not envision an active commitment to peace.

As the policy was implemented in 2022, the Mexican Congress, with the support of the President, voted to militarize public safety, most notably replacing the police with the National Guard, a military security agency. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) has often shown a confrontational attitude towards the feminist movement. He once accused feminist groups in Mexico of being involved in a "conservative conspiracy" to overthrow his government, which he said had hampered measures to combat gender-based violence and address the care crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. In a press conference, President AMLO stated that the movement was trying to influence his government and accused it of responding to interests contrary to his own (Maldonado, 2021).

During AMLO's leadership, the level of militarization has increased. Activists and experts in Mexico attribute this to the emergence of a culture of militaristic masculinity and increased access to firearms, which have exacerbated gender-based violence in the country (Philipson, 2023). The FFP in Mexico also lacks transparency and accountability mechanisms that allow civil society to track, monitor, and evaluate it. Based on Mexico's ongoing feminist foreign policy practices, which are contradictory (Philipson et al., 2023). This paper aims to outline the level of analysis of AMLO's leadership. Despite the low gender equality index, Mexico still adheres to a feminist foreign policy ideology.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative-explanatory research design to examine the interrelation between President AMLO's leadership personality and the projection of FFP in Mexico. The research is grounded in the interpretive paradigm, which aims to understand the social construction of political identity, gender narratives, and policy implementation through discourse and leadership analysis. The study utilizes a qualitative document analysis of secondary data sources. These include academic journal articles, government publications, policy statements, speeches, and credible media reports published between 2018 and 2024. The focus is on the content and context of AMLO's public discourse, institutional actions, and Mexico's feminist foreign policy framework.

Secondary data were selected based on their relevance to the research problem and their contribution to answering the central research question: *To what extent does AMLO's leadership personality influence the substance and symbolism of Mexico's feminist foreign policy?* Key sources include peer-reviewed academic works (e.g., Aggestam et al., 2019; Grut, 2024), official documents from the Mexican Secretariat of Foreign Affairs, international policy indexes (e.g., WPS Index), and critical feminist analyses. Two theoretical lenses inform the analysis: first, Feminist Foreign Policy Theory, which examines how power, representation, and intersectionality shape international policy narratives and priorities; Second, Leadership Personality Theory, especially Winter's (2003) model, which categorizes leadership influence through trait, cognitive, and motive dimensions. These frameworks were operationalized to assess how AMLO's public rhetoric, moral framing, and institutional deci-

sions reflect or contradict feminist principles in foreign policy. The thematic content analysis method was applied to systematically identify patterns and contradictions in AMLO's leadership discourse and the implementation of FFP. By analyzing these themes, the study offers an explanatory insight into how feminist foreign policy in Mexico functions as both a strategic narrative and a contested political practice.

Situating Leadership Traits in Feminist Foreign Policy

The evolution of feminist thought has significantly influenced the conceptualization and study of leadership. According to Kark and Buengeler (2024), leadership theories have developed in parallel with feminist waves, each offering distinct insights into gender dynamics in organizational contexts. The first wave of feminism, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focused primarily on securing fundamental rights for women, including suffrage and access to education and employment. The second wave of feminism, emerging in the 1960s, shifted focus from seeking integration within existing systems to challenging and revaluing traditionally feminized qualities. The third wave of feminism, emerging in the 1990s, introduced more complex understandings of identity and power through concepts like intersectionality. The fourth wave of feminism, emerging in the 2010s, is characterized by digital activism and the use of social media platforms to address issues of gender inequality (Badour, 2025).

Feminist leadership represents a distinct approach that integrates feminist principles with leadership practice. Rather than simply referring to women in leadership positions or stereotypically feminine leadership styles, feminist leadership constitutes a politically aware process that explicitly addresses questions of power, what it is, how it is distributed, how it can be shared, and how it is used for collective good. Table 1 examines the core principles and characteristics that define feminist leadership compared with traditional leadership models (Badour, 2025).

Table 1
Comparison of Traditional and Feminist Leadership Values

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Traditional Leadership</i>	<i>Feminist Leadership</i>
Concept of Power	Power over others	Power with and power to enable others
Decision-making	Hierarchical, top-down	Participatory, collaborative
Primary Focus	Goal achievement	Balance between goals and relationships
Approach to Diversity	Assimilation to the dominant culture	Valuation of difference and inclusion
Conflict Resolution	Avoidance or authoritative settlement	Transformative engagement
Success Metrics	Individual achievement, profit	Collective well-being, social impact

Source: Badour, 2025.

Table 1. Comparing traditional and feminist leadership reveals two fundamentally distinct paradigms of power and governance. Traditional leadership sees power as centralized and hierarchical. It focuses on control, making decisions from the top down, and measuring success by individual performance and material results. Feminist leadership, on the other hand, sees power as something that can be shared and used to help others. It puts a higher value on participation, collaboration, and shared responsibility. Traditional methods of dealing with conflict often use power or violence, but feminist leadership encourages conversation, transformative engagement, and building relationships. This change is ultimately a move away from individual success and towards the well-being of the group. Success is now measured not only by outputs but also by how well inequalities are challenged and social justice is advanced (Badour, 2025).

These three approaches share a standard core structure: the *triad* of “the people,” “the elite,” and “the general will.” Populist leaders often define these three elements in flexible and manipulative ways to create political legitimacy. In the international context, populism emerged as an attempt to counter “cosmopolitan elites” and globalist projects such as the European Union (Chrysosgelos, 2020). However, despite the abundance of studies, the personality aspect of populist leaders remains understudied. Drezner (2020) investigates Donald Trump’s characteristics of impulsiveness, short temper, and easily distracted attention, which result in a destructive and unstable

leadership style in foreign policy. Destradi and Plagemann (2019) add that populist leaders tend to personalize foreign policy, making it an extension of personal will rather than a product of institutional consensus. They argue that combining ideology (thick or thin) with personal leadership style is key to understanding the direction of populist foreign policy.

On the other hand, FFP is presented as an antithesis to the patriarchal and state-centered logic of realism. FFP, as explained by Aggestam and Bergman-Rosamond (2016) and Aggestam and True (2020), emphasizes gender equality, peace, demilitarization, and intersectionality. FFP rejects traditional power hierarchies and offers an ethical approach based on empathy and human relationships. From a feminist perspective, foreign policy is an arena heavily influenced by gendered power hierarchies. Populist leaders like Trump or Chávez tend to reproduce these hierarchies through confrontational rhetoric, exclusionary nationalism, and rejection of multilateral cooperation. Research by Wehner and Thies (2021) shows that populist leaders score low on traits that support multilateralism, such as openness and task-orientedness, but high on self-confidence and control over events. These traits contribute to a foreign policy that is more confrontational and symbolic than substantive.

While populism at first glance seems to have similarities with FFP in terms of *relationality*, as both claim to want to be closer to “the people”, the relations built by populist leaders are narrow and exclusive. They build solidarity through opposition to “others”: elites, immigrants, international institutions, and global actors. This contrasts with feminism, which emphasizes inclusive relations and the recognition of differences as strengths, not threats (Tickner, 1992). Populism also reinforces masculine norms in international politics, including the glorification of strongmen, top-down decisions, and disregard for consensus. In contrast, FFP advocates for democratic and inclusive decision-making processes, challenging who has the authority to decide, how decisions are made, and who is represented. From a feminist perspective, the personality of populist leaders is not simply an individual psychological phenomenon but rather a product of social structures that value masculinity and hierarchical power (Enloe, 2004).

Thus, a fundamental contradiction exists between populist leadership styles and FFP principles. Populist leaders utilize foreign policy to foster domestic loyalty through symbolic acts that demonstrate national strength, such as withdrawing from international agreements (e.g., Trump from the Paris Agreement or Chávez from the OAS). Their supporters consider these

policies ethical because they represent the “will of the people.” However, from a feminist perspective, they reflect an instrumental approach that sacrifices global justice for domestic image.

From Traditional to Feminist Foreign Policy

In 2020, Mexican society experienced significant unrest around demands for gender equality, especially at the domestic level. This surge in activism was marked by widespread protests, including a landmark march on International Women’s Day, March 8, 2020, highlighting issues such as violence against women and reproductive rights (Abarca, 2022; Rovira-Sancho & Morales-i-Gras, 2022). In response to this social pressure, President AMLO announced a feminist foreign policy aimed at addressing gender disparities both domestically and internationally (Abarca, 2022). The movement was fueled by a series of protests and collective actions, most notably the Women’s Strikes of 2017 and 2018, which highlighted the urgent need for gender equality and addressed issues such as gender-based violence and discrimination (Rovira-Sancho, 2015; Baitenmann et al., 2007). The second #PrimaveraVioleta was the moment of mass feminist movement in Mexico on April 24, 2016, which refers to the explosion of connected feminist protests (online–offline) in Mexico in 2016, which used social media and street actions to oppose patriarchal violence and demand that women “vivas nos queremos” live and be free from violence. This hashtag became a meeting point for feminist activism, connecting local and transnational movements against gender violence (Rovira-Sancho, 2015).

The feminist movement gained momentum, with protests increasing despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The March 8, 2020, march was a watershed moment, demonstrating a collective demand for action against gender-based violence (Abarca, 2022; Rovira-Sancho & Morales-i-Gras, 2022). AMLO’s feminist foreign policy announcements directly responded to growing demands for gender equality, reflecting a recognition of the movement’s influence on national discourse (Abarca, 2022). The protests brought significant attention to issues of gender inequality, leading to a broader societal conversation about women’s rights in Mexico (Rovira-Sancho & Morales-i-Gras, 2022). Feminist movement pressure has historically influenced government policy, as seen with initiatives such as the Progres program, which aims to empower women through economic incentives (Nagels & Pozos, 2022). While the feminist

movement has made strides in raising awareness and influencing policy, challenges remain, including state repression and societal resistance to fully embracing gender equality. The ongoing struggle reflects the complex interplay between activism and institutional responses in Mexico (Cerva, 2024).

Starting in the 1930s, Mexico established a relatively stable political system, substantially reducing the threat of military intervention by the United States. With its relatively guaranteed sovereignty and security, Mexico expanded its margins of autonomy to implement its domestic and external policies vis-à-vis other regions, especially Latin America and Europe, with whom it shares historical and cultural ties, but also with Asia-Pacific and, more recently, Africa, Central Asia, and the Middle East. In addition, since that same decade, Mexico started to become an active participant in international organizations: it was recognized as a member of the international community with its entry into the League of Nations on September 9, 1931, one of its main concerns for almost a century since its independence (between 1821 and the 1930s). Later, Mexico was a founding member of the United Nations (1945) and of every global and regional international organization in the Americas and continues to work actively within them. Its participation in international and regional organizations has been primarily legalistic in nature, defending the value of international law as a means of containing or restricting the use of force in the international system and promoting its foreign policy normative principles. This defense of international law has been strategic regarding increasing the costs of U.S. interventions in the internal affairs of Mexico and other countries in Latin America (Schiavon, 2011, 2022).

In the 1970s, feminism in Mexico began to gain international attention, most notably through the 1975 International Year of Women Conference in Mexico City. This marked a pivotal moment in forming transnational feminist networks and influenced Mexico's domestic policy priorities, in line with President Luis Echeverría's efforts to gain international recognition (Olcott, 2022). Mexican feminism has evolved from local demands for women's rights in the 1970s to a more central role in Mexican politics, influenced by globalization and ethnic and class divisions in society (Marcos, 1999). In the early 1970s, the emerging Mexican feminism focused its goals on women's rights, borrowing heavily from the demands of Western feminist movements (Morgan, 1984). This movement demystified the patriarchal double morality about sexuality, demanded access to abortion rights, and debunked the feminine stereotype according to which women's identity was made exclusively

dependent on having a husband and being a mother. Small groups that raised consciousness allowed new critical demands to be expressed and articulated (Morgan, 1984). As a consequence, many women began to write, as well as to engage in theater, film, and political activities. Most of the women who committed themselves to the leftist opposition parties were middle-class (Neft & Levine, 1997).

In 1976, feminist groups began to work together and formed the “Coalición de Mujeres Feministas”. This helped the feminist movement to be more clearly defined as a social force. Three demands contributed to unifying the perspectives prevailing in the various feminist groups (Morgan, 1984; Neft & Levine, 1997). These demands were (1) Voluntary pregnancy (maternidad voluntaria), including the right to sexual education, the use of contraceptives, and abortion on demand; (2) Fighting sexual violence; (3) Lesbian (and gay) rights. Following these demands, the first legal project on voluntary maternity was elaborated and presented in 1976 (Morgan, 1984). In 1977, the first assistance center for women victims of rape and sexual violence was founded (Neft & Levine, 1997; Marcos, 1999).

During these early years, the first feminist publications, such as FEM and La Revuelta, began to appear (Morgan, 1984). Radio programs on women’s issues from a feminist perspective began in 1980. The feminist movement, which had begun and grown mainly in Mexico City, spread to more states in the Mexican Republic (Lugo, 1984). In 1979, the Frente Nacional por la Liberación y los Derechos de las Mujeres (FNALIDM) was founded. For the first time in the history of Mexican feminism, the association brought together women with very diverse perspectives, not necessarily feminist (Lugo, 1984; Neft & Levine, 1997). Among them were members of the “Unión Nacional de Mujeres” (Morgan, 1984), linked to the “International Democratic Federation of Women”; activists from leftist parties; elite women from the PRI (the ruling party); members of lesbian groups; mothers of the disappeared and political prisoners (las madres); trade unionists and factory workers; the organized urban poor; and peasants. The main objective of the FNALIDM was to create a political force whose cohesion depended implicitly on the universality of women’s oppression (it was not until later years that the issue of differences between women was elaborated more explicitly, allowing the construction of a new type of feminism) (Lugo, 1984; Marcos, 1999).

This pluralistic collaboration gained momentum during the eighties (Neft & Levine, 1997). Women from the urban poor, factory workers, trade union-

ists, peasants, and rural migrants living in shantytowns began coordinating their demands with those of the feminist movement (Lugo, 1984; Momsen, 1991). A larger women's movement began to take shape. Eventually, the proper filtering of feminist demands against "machismo" (the rules of patriarchal society that seem to imply that men have all the rights and women all the duties) began to become a significant problem also for trade unions, peasants, and poor urban women, who incorporated this debate into their political agendas (Lugo, 1984; Neft & Levine, 1997). Since then, the central issue in the Mexican feminist movement has been, in short, how to coordinate the rights of the dispossessed with the specific rights of women. All Mexican feminist groups can be placed somewhere on a continuum between giving priority only to women's rights without regard to class and ethnicity and, on the other hand, prioritizing the rights of the disadvantaged without regard to women's rights (Marcos, 1999).

The Mexican Constitution states that the country's system of government is presidential and federal, with strong bicameralism (legislature divided into the Senate and Chamber of Deputies). Regarding the institutional division of powers, it is characterized as one of the systems with the strongest formal separation of powers. However, for more than 70 years (1929–2000) of single-party hegemony under the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI), Mexico functioned as one of the most centralized political systems in the world. To understand why the Mexican president was so powerful, it is necessary to analyze the relationship between two central political actors in the system: the president, who served as the head of the state and government, and the PRI. This centralization of presidential power was constrained by the democratization process in 2000, which remains. From 2000 to 2018, Mexico had divided governments, where the executive did not control majorities within both chambers of the legislature. However, with the election of AMLO as president in 2018, whose coalition of parties, led by Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional (MORENA), also won legislative majorities in both chambers, policy decision-making and implementation in Mexico have been centralized again, including foreign policy (Schiavon, 2022).

The Mexican Women's Movement has had to contend, on the one hand, with an oppressive Catholic double standard that has shaped women's lives and their relationships with men across sexual, familial, social, and political domains. On the other hand, Indigenous ancestry has largely remained invisible both within the movement and in the broader social sphere. Until

the Zapatista uprising in January 1994, these ethnic concerns were largely absent from Mexican social movements. Racism and ethnic discrimination have formed a socio-economic context in which poverty is often associated with the physical and cultural characteristics of individuals belonging to one of the 56 Indigenous groups in Mexico (Remo, 1995).

AMLO has consistently positioned himself as a left-populist leader with a mission to fight for social justice, redistribution of wealth, and the elevation of “Los de abajo” (the poor and marginalized). His popular rhetoric and policies have always emphasized the principle of “primero los pobres” (the poor should come first). Ideologically, AMLO combines classical left values with conservative morality that is religious and nationalistic in nature. Within this framework, he places Indigenous communities at the core of the nation’s moral community, reflecting the values of collectivism, loyalty to tradition, and rejection of neoliberalism. A recurring theme in AMLO’s narrative is the promise to behave with the integrity of the Mexican leader: ‘I will not betray the people’ (Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2020), a constant leitmotiv in his public discourse. Furthermore, when talking about his supporters, AMLO urges them to adopt the same moral stance: “If the president is corrupt, everyone will follow that bad example, but if the president... If the president is honest, we all have to behave well” (Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos Indígenas, 2020; Grut, 2024).

AMLO’s feminist approach is more reflective of first-wave feminism, that is, increasing women’s representation in politics and decision-making, than fourth-wave feminism, which focuses on gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and intersectional feminism. For example, he appointed 17 women to his cabinet, far more than his predecessors. Despite these seemingly progressive symbolic steps, many observers and contemporary feminists in Mexico have criticized AMLO for not prioritizing key issues of the contemporary feminist movement, such as femicide and domestic violence. Caroline Beer notes that AMLO tends to favor actions with immediate, visible results (such as appointing women to public office) over addressing more complex structural issues (Grut, 2024). Thus, AMLO’s personal belief in feminist values is selective and rests on the charismatic political logic of left-populism, in which recognition of women’s rights is seen more as a means of affirming his moral and leadership position than as a full-fledged ideological commitment to intersectional feminism.

AMLO's 4T framework

AMLO explicitly stated that *La Cuarta Transformación* (4T) is a feminist movement: “Y la Cuarta Transformación es feminista. (...) Las mujeres [están] en la conducción de todo el proceso de transformación de nuestro país” (López Obrador, 2023). The “Fourth Transformation” (4T) of AMLO's Mexican administration (2018–2024) was a project designed to combat corruption and poverty through nationalist and left-leaning policies, primarily focused on universal social programs (Tricontinental, 2025). AMLO's leadership is characterized by a confrontational and moralistic discourse toward established political elites, especially the PRI and PAN, whom he groups under the label “PRIAN”. He accuses them of betraying national sovereignty, engaging in corruption, and abandoning the people for neoliberal interests. This antagonism forms the backbone of his populist narrative that pits “the pure people” against “the corrupt elite”. Regarding political strategy, AMLO transitioned from PRI to PRD before founding MORENA, which is described not merely as a party but as a movement-cum-party formed to realize his “Fourth Transformation 4T”. This move allowed AMLO to consolidate personal authority and control over the change narrative, distancing himself from the traditional party structure he views as morally compromised.

Despite his populist rhetoric, AMLO maintains strategic alliances with sectors traditionally associated with power, such as military leaders and select business elites. His close political circles often feature both groups, reflecting an inclusive yet hierarchical configuration of authority that continues to resonate with patriarchal and nationalist traditions. These alliances complicate his feminist messaging, particularly when military institutions, tasked with peace and national security, are implicated in gendered violence and repression. His militarization of infrastructure and security policy stands at odds with feminist principles advocating for demilitarization and community-based safety initiatives. These contradictions are not incidental but can be observed across three interrelated dimensions of AMLO's political strategy: the performative projection of feminist values in domestic governance, the discursive construction of feminism within the Fourth Transformation (4T), and the promotion of feminist foreign policy at the international level.

First, the projection of feminist commitments is most visible in the symbolic and institutional inclusion of women within the executive branch. AMLO's administration marked a significant departure from previous gov-

ernments by establishing a gender-parity cabinet and appointing women to lead key ministries, including Energy, Education, and Foreign Affairs (Rojas, 2022). These appointments signaled a formal commitment to inclusive governance and strengthened the visibility of women in high-level decision-making positions.

However, by 2018, women already held approximately 48% of seats in the Lower House and 49% in the Senate, positioning Mexico among the leading countries globally in terms of female parliamentary representation (Rojas, 2022). This suggests that progress in women's political representation cannot be attributed solely to AMLO's administration but reflects a longer trajectory of institutional reforms. Despite these gains, women's access to political power remains constrained by persistent structural barriers, including gender-based violence, limited access to executive positions at the state level, and the broader context of feminicide that continues to characterize Mexican society.

Second, tensions are also evident in the ideological framing of feminism within AMLO's broader political project, the Fourth Transformation (4T). Positioned as a moral and historical rupture, the 4T seeks to address corruption, inequality, and elite privilege through a discourse centered on ethical renewal and social justice. Within this narrative, "the people" (*el pueblo*) are constructed as a moral community characterized by honesty, resilience, and collective wisdom, often rooted in representations of Indigenous heritage. While this framing enables an inclusive and morally resonant political identity, it simultaneously risks oversimplifying complex social hierarchies and marginalizing intersectional feminist concerns. Policies associated with the 4T, including austerity measures, anti-corruption reforms, and expanded social programs, demonstrate a commitment to redistribution and welfare. However, the extent to which these initiatives engage directly with gender-specific inequalities remains limited, particularly in addressing systemic violence and entrenched patriarchal norms (Sánchez, 2020).

Third, a further layer of contradiction emerges in Mexico's adoption of an FFP, which has been actively promoted in multilateral forums and diplomatic engagements. Internationally, this policy positions Mexico as a progressive actor committed to gender equality and inclusive global governance. However, this external projection contrasts with persistent domestic challenges, including high levels of gender-based violence and ongoing tensions with feminist civil society actors. As such, the FFP risks functioning primarily as a form

of symbolic diplomacy, enhancing Mexico's global image without being fully anchored in comprehensive domestic reform. The gap between international commitments and internal realities ultimately limits the transformative potential of this policy (Grut, 2024).

Taken together, these dynamics illustrate a broader paradox within AMLO's leadership. While feminist language and symbolic gestures are incorporated into his political narrative, they are often deployed in ways that prioritize political legitimacy and consolidation over substantive structural change. This approach has enabled the administration to cultivate broad-based support while simultaneously generating friction with feminist movements and civil society actors who demand deeper, intersectional reforms, particularly in addressing persistent issues such as femicide and gender-based violence. In this sense, AMLO's engagement with feminism can be understood as strategic and instrumental, expanding the symbolic boundaries of inclusion without fundamentally challenging the underlying structures of patriarchal power.

Analysis of Mexico's decision-making process

Mexico has emerged as a significant player in the global discourse on gender equality, particularly under the administration of President AMLO. Grut's thesis emphasizes AMLO's strong anti-establishment, anti-elite rhetoric, which includes civil society organizations when they are perceived as part of the neoliberal or conservative status quo. Feminist groups, particularly those that mobilize against gender-based violence, femicide, or patriarchal state structures, often fall into this category in AMLO's narrative framing. Rather than embracing feminist civil society as a vital partner in democratization, he casts them as adversarial, labeling some of their actions as politically motivated or manipulated by opposition forces.

AMLO's populist framework relies on a binary logic of "the people" versus "the elite," and feminist NGOs or movements that challenge state inaction on femicide or reproductive rights are sometimes portrayed as part of the latter even if they represent vulnerable women on the ground (inferred from Grut's, 2024) analysis of antagonistic populist discourse and strategic messaging). However, these steps are not accompanied by institutional support for grassroots feminist demands. Feminist activists in Mexico have repeatedly criticized his government for minimizing the epidemic of femicide, often framing such critiques as attacks on his administration. This is reflected in the

government's failure to support comprehensive legislation on reproductive rights, as well as in its decision to militarize public security, a move widely opposed by feminists due to the armed forces' documented record of involvement in gender-based violence.

Grut's work shows how AMLO's charismatic and moralistic leadership style leaves little room for collaborative policymaking with actors that present autonomous or confrontational demands, even if those actors represent historically marginalized groups like women and indigenous communities (Grut, 2024). Table 2 presents a classification of actions affiliated with Mexico's FFP, distinguishing between symbolic initiatives and substantive policy measures. This classification helps assess the extent to which Mexico's feminist foreign policy commitments translate into concrete institutional reforms and policy implementation.

Table 2
Actions Aligned with Mexico's Feminist Foreign Policy

<i>No.</i>	<i>Action (brief)</i>	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Brief explanation</i>	<i>Source</i>
1	Official announcement of the adoption of FFP by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE), Jan 2020.	Symbolic	A formal declaration that Mexico adopts the FFP and the five guiding principles of foreign policy. Important as a declaration of policy direction.	Mexican Government announcement of FFP adoption.
2	Declaring FFP as “one of the top 3 in the world” (promotional press release).	Symbolic	International praise/affirmation enhances a diplomatic profile but is more narrative/promotional in nature.	Press release SRE.
3	Organize/host FFP ministerial conferences (e.g., 3rd Ministerial Conference, Mexico City, 1–3 Jul 2024).	Symbolic (with substantive elements).	International event that affirms Mexico's leadership on the issue; provides space for dialogue and promises; potential for substantive impact depending on outcome/continuation.	Conference report/event summary.
4	Consular services reform & comprehensive care protocols for migrant women.	Substantive	Expansion of consular services to address women's specific needs (protection, support). This changes service practices within the diplomatic/consular network.	SRE announcement regarding extension of outreach policy and comprehensive care for women.
5	The Foreign Service career reform draft/approval incorporates a gender and parity perspective (Senado, 2021).	Substantive	Changes to laws/rules governing the diplomatic staff structure: establishing gender parity, gender training, anti-harassment policies, and equal pay, directly transform the institution.	News reports and summary of Senate-approved reforms (2021).

<i>No.</i>	<i>Action (brief)</i>	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Brief explanation</i>	<i>Source</i>
6	SRE internal program: 2020–2024 work plan, gender mainstreaming & staff training.	Substantive	Internal documents and work plans to implement a gender perspective across all units, including diplomatic personnel training, evidence of institutionalization of the policy.	SRE article/analysis on work plans and institutional feminism.
7	Diplomatic campaigns to advance issues such as reproductive rights and the prevention of violence against women in multilateral forums.	Mixed, Symbolic if only rhetorical; Substantive if followed by concrete multilateral actions (funding, agreements).	Often appears in speeches/diplomacy; effectiveness depends on whether it results in real commitments/funding/working coalitions.	SRE & analytical articles on efforts to promote issues in international forums.
8	Zero-tolerance policy and prevention mechanisms at foreign missions (embassies/consulates).	Substantive	Implementation of harassment/GBV prevention mechanisms in the mission's work environment; demonstrating operational changes to overseas missions.	SRE report/article mentioning zero-tolerance policy in the representative network.
9	Publications, articles, and academic presentations / preliminary evaluations (Revista Mexicana de Política Exterior, preliminary analysis).	Symbolic (in the supervisory/accountability function).	Academic/analytical discourse that assesses promises versus practice, not direct government action, but important for accountability.	Initial assessment & analysis article on RMPE.
10	Independent criticism and analysis showing the gap between FFP declarations and domestic realities (need for accountability).	Evidence for a gap (supports the classification of some actions as symbolic).	Research and reports that require evidence of concrete implementation and accountability (e.g., Global Observatory, F4FF).	The Global Observatory (evaluative critique) & F4FF/publications emphasize the need for concrete action.

Source: Processed by authors.

Table 2 highlights a category of mixed actions, where rhetorical commitments in international forums may lead to substantive outcomes depending on follow-up mechanisms and policy continuity. This classification reveals the tension between normative commitment and practical implementation in Mexico's feminist foreign policy, reflecting broader contradictions within the AMLO administration's governance approach, where progressive international narratives coexist with limited engagement with domestic feminist demands. One of the most noted critiques from feminist civil society is that AMLO appears indifferent or dismissive toward large-scale feminist mobilizations. For instance, mass protests such as the International Women's Day marches and campaigns against gender-based impunity have been met with defensiveness, with AMLO suggesting the protests are infiltrated by provocateurs or manipulated by conservative forces. Displacement, framing the issue as a media exaggeration rather than a systemic crisis; deflection, focusing instead on the symbolic achievements of appointing women to power without addressing structural inequality (Grut, 2024).

This posture reflects AMLO's general tendency, as analyzed by Grut, to reject criticisms of the Fourth Transformation as moral attacks rather than substantive policy critiques. A fundamental contradiction marks AMLO's engagement with feminist civil society. While he seeks to integrate women into the symbolic heart of his national transformation project, he marginalizes feminist actors who critique his priorities or methods. Grut's concept of "missionary politics" helps explain this behavior: AMLO projects himself as a morally redemptive figure, making criticism not just political opposition but a challenge to a quasi-sacred mission. Thus, feminist activists who demand justice for femicide victims or autonomy over reproductive rights are sometimes treated as heretical voices rather than legitimate stakeholders. This creates a discursive exclusion, even as women are celebrated as political subjects within the 4T.

Mexico, in the lead-up to the March 8th demonstrations, has become the most controversial symbol of International Women's Day. President López Obrador addressed feminism in a speech, saying that "On Women's Day, a whole smear campaign has been launched against the government and against me," López Obrador said in a video in which he attempted to equate all his opponents without nuance. President López Obrador emphasized, "And let me be clear: I am not a sexist; I support women's rights, I support equality, and I always have been". He pointed out that for the first time in his six years

in office, there is a female Interior Minister and a Minister of Public Security. He credited the increase in parity in various institutions, “it is because of our struggle” and asserted, “I am a humanist, and I am not against feminism. I am against corruption, manipulation, authoritarianism, and hypocrisy. Now it turns out that conservatives are feminists? This is the breaking point” (Manetto, 2021).

His government has adopted a feminist foreign policy to address gender disparities domestically and internationally. This narrative explores the underlying gender values that inform this policy, analyzing its implications for Mexico’s international relations and its commitment to human rights. AMLO’s feminist foreign policy is rooted in a broader commitment to social justice and human rights. The policy was formally announced in 2020, positioning Mexico as a leader in advocating for women’s rights on the global stage. According to Mexican Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard, the policy aims to “promote gender equality and the empowerment of women as a fundamental part of our foreign relations” (Ebrard, 2020). This approach aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5, which seeks to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Mexico’s commitment to these goals reflects a recognition of the systemic inequalities women face, both within and globally (United Nations, 2015).

AMLO’s administration has emphasized gender equality as a core value in its domestic policies. The government has implemented various initiatives to combat gender-based violence, promote women’s participation in politics, and ensure equal access to education and healthcare. For instance, the establishment of the “Gender Alert” mechanism in several states aims to address and prevent violence against women (Córdova-Plaza, 2025).

These domestic efforts are mirrored in Mexico’s foreign policy, where the government seeks to leverage its position to advocate for women’s rights internationally. By aligning domestic gender values with foreign policy objectives, AMLO’s administration aims to create a cohesive narrative that underscores Mexico’s commitment to gender equality. Mexico’s feminist foreign policy has significant implications for its international relations. By prioritizing gender issues, Mexico seeks to strengthen its diplomatic ties with countries with similar values. This approach has been particularly evident in Mexico’s engagement with multilateral organizations, such as the Organization of American States (OAS) and the United Nations, where it has championed initiatives to promote women’s rights (Organization of American States, 1994). Moreover,

Mexico's feminist foreign policy has positioned it as a counter-narrative to more conservative approaches to gender issues in international relations. By advocating for women's rights, Mexico enhances its soft power and challenges traditional power dynamics that often marginalize gender concerns in foreign policy discussions (Meyer & Prügl, 1999). Despite the progressive nature of AMLO's feminist foreign policy, challenges remain. Critics argue that the government's domestic record on gender violence and inequality does not fully align with its international rhetoric. For instance, Mexico continues to grapple with high rates of femicide and gender-based violence, raising questions about the effectiveness of its policies (González & Morales, 2018). Furthermore, some scholars argue that while feminist foreign policy is a step in the right direction, it must be accompanied by concrete actions and accountability measures to ensure that gender values are genuinely integrated into all aspects of governance (Squires, 2013).

AMLO's approach to history is heavily influenced by a teleological perspective, often referring to past events as beneficial transformations for the "People" of Mexico. These transformations, such as the Mexican War of Independence, the Reform War, and the Mexican Revolution, are framed as key to the moral and social development of the nation. This framework is inherently progressive, yet it also emphasizes a vision of society that, while inclusive, can sometimes sideline gender issues unless they align with broader social movements (Ortiz-Delgado, 2023). The social context in which López Obrador operates is undeniably patriarchal, influenced by traditional Mexican gender roles that often position women as secondary in political and social life. His policies have been shaped by the political and moral beliefs rooted in this patriarchal society. Despite his liberal and transformative vision for Mexico, AMLO's foreign policy and domestic gender politics reveal a balancing act between progressive ideals and entrenched patriarchal structures that influence his leadership approach. His governance, for example, has focused more on tackling issues like corruption and poverty, which indirectly affect women, but has not explicitly dismantled patriarchal structures (Ortiz-Delgado, 2023).

Broader social justice concerns influence AMLO's foreign policy, but its direct alignment with feminist values remains ambiguous. While he has taken steps toward promoting gender equality in his government, the official narrative focuses primarily on reducing inequality and improving living conditions for the most marginalized. However, his commitment to social justice could imply a form of feminist policy that aligns with his broader moral stance,

even if not explicitly articulated through gender-focused diplomacy. While AMLO advocates for social reforms, the application of feminist ideals in foreign policy is still developing. His administration's focus on redistributing wealth and advocating for the working class aligns with feminist values of equality. However, more needs to be done to address the specific needs of women, especially in international affairs. His rhetoric often champions the marginalized "People," which includes women, but his policy actions may not thoroughly prioritize gender as a distinct aspect of foreign diplomacy.

AMLO's understanding of social justice stems from his belief in the moral, almost religious transformation of Mexican society. This vision involves creating a society where the "People," especially those disenfranchised by neoliberal policies, are uplifted. However, the framework often overlooks deeper gender imbalances within this narrative, reflecting the influence of traditional patriarchal structures. His moral vision, while progressive regarding social and economic equality, does not significantly challenge patriarchal systems unless they impede broader social justice. AMLO's political philosophy is informed by a combination of Enlightenment, Christian, and humanist morals, emphasizing the well-being of the People and social transformation. However, his personal gender values have not been strongly voiced regarding feminism. This reflects a broader political culture in Mexico, where women's rights are seen through the lens of social justice but are not always addressed directly in policy terms.

Conclusions

This study finds that Mexico's Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) is essentially a Janus-faced project. There is a sharp, troubling disconnect between the progressive image Mexico projects to the world and the patriarchal reality it maintains at home. On the surface, the administration has successfully cultivated an "enlightened" global identity by adopting the language of feminist diplomacy and aligning with UN sustainability goals. Yet, this research reveals that this identity is largely performative. While AMLO has made symbolic moves like appointing women to high-level positions and framing his "Fourth Transformation" as a feminist endeavor, these gestures lack the actual policy mechanisms or genuine civil society engagement needed for real change. Rather than dismantling old power structures, this branding serves a strategic populist goal: it lets the

government claim moral high ground internationally while keeping a rigid, top-down grip on power.

The other side of this duality lies in AMLO's moralistic brand of populism, which has actually created a hostile environment for the very activists the policy is supposed to represent. By leaning into a binary people vs elite logic, AMLO often dismisses feminist critics as political enemies or neoliberal agitators rather than treating them as legitimate voices. This reveals the core failure of a populist-led FFP, where it adopts the *look* of gender equality for global points while ignoring domestic crises like femicide and reproductive rights. By looking at the intersection of AMLO's personality and his policy choices, it becomes clear that his embrace of feminism is more of a tool for personal power than a commitment to reform. In the end, Mexico's policy is feminist in name abroad but remains deeply patriarchal in practice at home.

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