

# Towards a Feminist Democracy

## *Hacia una democracia feminista*

Nahuiquetzalli Pérez Mañón

Universidad de Guanajuato

*nahuima\_98@outlook.com*

■

### **Abstract:**

Mexico was the first country in Latin America to adopt a feminist foreign policy (FFP), in 2020. This represented a milestone for women and feminist movements. Now, the challenge is to move from words to action. The main argument of this article is that a feminist foreign policy can only be successful in a feminist democracy. Only by restructuring the system, based on equality, can we achieve the goals of the FFP.

■

### **Resumen:**

México fue el primer país en América Latina en adoptar una política exterior feminista (PEF), en 2020. Esto significó un gran avance para las mujeres y los movimientos feministas. Ahora, el reto es llevar el discurso a la práctica. El argumento principal que se desarrolla en este artículo es que una política exterior feminista sólo podrá ser exitosa en una democracia feminista. Por ello, es indispensable llevar a cabo una reestructuración en el país, con base en el principio de igualdad, para alcanzar los objetivos de la PEF.

■

### **Key Words:**

Foreign policy, feminism, democracy, equality.

■

### **Palabras clave:**

Política exterior, feminismo, democracia, igualdad.

# Towards a Feminist Democracy

*Nabuiquetzalli Pérez Mañon*

Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture.

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE<sup>1</sup>

In order to change the various and unequal realities experienced by women and girls in Mexico, new structural strategies must be implemented by government institutions and civil society. For Mexico to have a feminist foreign policy implies adopting a political stance as a government that means generating a series of actions facilitating and guaranteeing equality between women and men, while providing for a transition towards a feminist democracy, but what are the key elements required for this to happen?

Women have played a fundamental role throughout Mexico's political history, even if it is not recognised nor seen as being in the public interest. Throughout the world, feminist movements have been occupying historically male public spaces and have fought for, and won, the rights that recognise women as human beings and active political subjects. We do not have to go very far back, it was only 67 years ago that Mexican women acquired the right to suffrage and citizenship, an action that allowed them to enter the country's public life for the first time. This was the driving force behind a change that has not yet culminated.

---

<sup>1</sup> Taken from Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: 'I Decided to Call myself a Happy Feminist'", *The Guardian*, October 17, 2014, in <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/oct/17/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-extract-we-should-all-be-feminists> (date of access: March 30, 2021).

It was in Beijing in September 1995 when representatives of 189 governments, including Mexico's, met with the shared aim of generating strategies to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment; the result was the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Platform for Action was formulated around 12 areas, one of them, "Women in power and decision-making", which, in Mexico, was implemented by including women's representation in the legislative chambers where they were allocated 30% of legislative spaces, which years later would increase to 40%, but it was not until the 2014 electoral reform that gender parity in the legislative sphere was established.

Democracy has met neither the expectations nor the needs of women, because this model simply does not recognise them as part of a participatory society. In other words, only a democracy that allows itself to be restructured from a feminist perspective can truly operate on the basis of equality. As Alicia Miyares says, a "feminist democracy, considers that this model has to be that of a participatory democracy. [...] Feminist democracy is based on policies of recognition, that is, the inclusion of spheres that are wrongly called private in the public sphere".<sup>2</sup>

A feminist democracy must meet women's needs from this perspective because it "implies a profound and complex reordering of relations with men and changes in norms, as well as the redefinition of the economy and the distribution of social, economic and cultural resources".<sup>3</sup> So far, no democracy has really been the government of all, since "democracy" is interpreted on the basis of the theory that analyses it, as well as how "government" and "all" are defined. It is essential to understand that feminism, then, is also a political theory, just as socialism and liberalism are, offering a new paradigm of thought and a new model of democracy, which calls for the institutional and cultural transformation of society based not only on the inclusion of women, but on political transformation aimed at an egalitarian, just, participatory and diverse society.

---

<sup>2</sup> Alicia Miyares, *Democracia feminista*, Madrid/Valencia, Cátedra/Universitat de Valencia, 2019, p. 189.

<sup>3</sup> Marcela Lagarde, *Género y feminismo. Desarrollo humano y democracia*, Madrid, Horas y horas, 1996, p.164.

Mexico does not yet have a feminist democracy. However, in September 2019, Foreign Minister Marcelo Ebrard announced before the United Nations that Mexico is a feminist country, which led to the country's first feminist foreign policy, a pioneer in Latin America, which is made up of five principles that seek to “guide government actions to reduce and eliminate structural differences, gaps and gender inequalities in order to build a more just and prosperous society”.<sup>4</sup> In summary, the principles are: a foreign policy with a gender perspective and a feminist foreign plus agenda, gender parity, an Ministry of Foreign Affairs (SRE) free of violence, equality and visibility, and intersectionality.<sup>5</sup> Each of these principles in themselves represent challenges for the SRE, the government and society, as they imply breaking down social resistance to feminisms and generating a new culture where women's development is not limited.

But how can these five principles be achieved without coordination between the country's domestic and foreign policy? Juan Carlos Mendoza Sánchez explains foreign policy as “the sphere in which the actions and decisions taken by the state to defend its interests and promote its objectives in the international arena are defined and executed; therefore, it is nothing more than a continuation of the state's domestic policy”.<sup>6</sup> Following this premise, it is pertinent to delve into the implications of announcing a feminist foreign policy for the internal and external development of the country. Adopting feminism as a guiding light for Mexico's international actions implies adopting congruent positions and including feminism in governmental actions to change the structure of the Mexican state. Foreign policy should be part of a domestic policy and agenda;<sup>7</sup> in this case, a feminist one too.

<sup>4</sup> Subsecretaría para Asuntos Multilaterales y Derechos Humanos-Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, *La Política Exterior Feminista del Gobierno de México*, Mexico, SRE, 2020, [p. 4], in [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/576095/Presentación\\_PEF\\_baja.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/576095/Presentación_PEF_baja.pdf) (date of access: March 30, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.*, p. [6].

<sup>6</sup> Juan Carlos Mendoza Sánchez, *Cien años de política exterior mexicana. De Francisco I. Madero a Enrique Peña Nieto. Momentos trascendentes*, Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Estudios Históricos de México/Grupo Editorial Cenzontle, 2014, p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> *Idem.*

Mexican domestic politics, although gradual progress on gender issues has been made, still has a long way to go. It is necessary to achieve vertical and horizontal parity in all spheres of public life in the country: in governorships, municipalities and other institutions. The modification of the law alone does not suffice for achieving gender parity; it is necessary to build the conditions that allow women and men, girls and boys, access to comprehensive and quality education, as well as to the same opportunities for a dignified development. It is not enough to have the first parity cabinet—which is, in itself, something unprecedented and something to be celebrated in Mexican history—, but also to emulate this parity at all political and social levels in the country. It implies integrating women, without racial, social or gender identity distinctions, into public life, so that they can discuss and decide on gender and non-gender issues; eliminating the wage gap so that women's work allows them access to ownership of land, economic autonomy, a dignified life and a progressive reduction in the poverty rate among women and girls; and including in basic, secondary and higher education subjects that allow access to education with a gender and feminist perspective. It also implies recognising and punishing violence against women and acting forcefully to eliminate the 10.5 femicides that occur daily in the country, according to the Executive Secretariat of the National Public Security System.<sup>8</sup>

In accordance with the above, it is necessary to clarify that feminist foreign policy is for now a promising aspiration, a strategy with a number of challenges inherent to the feminist stance that the Mexican government has decided to adopt because of social needs.

In order to settle the historical debt owed to women, it is important to emphasise that it is not enough to change the discourse or to include the word feminist in it. It is necessary to act on the same premises as the movements that have not stopped fighting for equality.

---

<sup>8</sup> UN Women Mexico, "ONU México llama a escuchar las voces de las mujeres que claman igualdad y justicia", March 6, 2020, in <https://mexico.unwomen.org/es/noticias-y-eventos/articulos/2020/03/onu-mexico-llama-a-escuchar-las-vozes-de-las-mujeres> (date of access: April 29, 2021).

Although it may seem obvious, the challenges and implications of feminist foreign policy cannot be separated from the internal reality of the country, which currently lacks a feminist agenda, policies and actions that would lead to Mexico's democratic development. In order to comply with the first principle of this policy, namely to have a gender perspective and from there to build a feminist agenda, it is necessary to use feminism as a transversal diagnostic tool and to adopt a democratic and progressive framework for action that provides for the integration of the other principles. The feminist foreign policy that the government intends to pursue must be constructed in a comprehensive manner. Also an understanding of the importance of training SRE civil servants to raise their awareness of gender issues is crucial. Furthermore, the shaping of the feminist agenda must be focused on the recognition and elimination of violence against women, as it contributes to institutional change that moves away from *machista* dynamics towards feminism. For feminist foreign policy, gender equality is an end in itself; by achieving equality of conditions, rights and opportunities, it contributes to the maintenance of peace, international security and the sustainable development of the country: "Feminism calls for a model of democracy that serves both developing and developed societies".<sup>9</sup> But why is it important to consider sustainable development in Mexico from a feminist perspective? Because among the most important axes in the democratic development of the country are the sustainable development goals that are part of the United Nations 2030 Agenda and that act in favour of people, the planet and prosperity in order to provide access justice, and this cannot be achieved without women.<sup>10</sup>

With regard to gender parity within the SRE, it is not only a matter of expanding and improving the conditions for women to enter the foreign service on the same career path as men, and subsequently be promoted to become consuls, ministers or ambassadors, but also that the inclusion

<sup>9</sup> A. Miyares, *op. cit.* p. 201.

<sup>10</sup> United Nations, "La Asamblea General adopta la Agenda 2030 para el Desarrollo Sostenible", September 25, 2015, in <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/es/2015/09/la-asamblea-general-adopta-la-agenda-2030-para-el-desarrollo-sostenible/> (date of access: March 30, 2021).

of women on an equal footing allows for a feminist foreign policy that includes an agenda in which women participate actively and not only in gender issues.

It is in this context that equality is the end goal and not the process. It will be achieved through comprehensive feminist actions by the government and the SRE. Within this framework, it is necessary to highlight that one of the important factors towards the implementation of this policy is the reaction that the word feminist generates; this is a consequence of the conceptual distortion derived from misinformation, religious beliefs, political inclinations, the recognition of violence exercised or experienced, and the constant levelling of *machismo* and feminism as if they were heteronyms, which gives rise to the perception that feminism is a pejorative term for something as important as Mexican foreign policy. It will be necessary to normalise, through education, that feminism does not exclude men, but is a model of equality that seeks participation and substantive representation.

Undoubtedly, epitomising the struggle of feminism is the last principle, the so-called *intersectionality*, which consists of recognising the experiences due to the gender condition that crosses the body of women and giving them a voice through inclusion in the formation of the public agenda and thus taking into account the needs of Mexican women, such as those who are mothers, single mothers, those who are poor, illiterate, those who are exploited, those who have disappeared, young women who do not study, those who do study, migrant women, those who work in politics, those who have never worked for pay, those who are breadwinners, those who work such long hours that they cannot be mothers, those who do not want to be mothers, indigenous women, those who have been raped and those who have been murdered, all of them.

In short, including feminism in foreign policy goes beyond modifying a discourse that is incorporated into the social demands of the time; it is about action, which seems to be the beginning of a very important change in Mexico's history. Mexico's multilateral actions, together with other countries, will now have to include women in decision-making, but also the international agenda and presence will be a milestone.

I like to think that there is a will for a paradigm shift that is not only nominal, that because we now have a stated feminist foreign policy we can

glimpse what feminist author Ursula K. Le Guin says: “We can’t restructure our society without restructuring the English language”.<sup>11</sup> This is only the beginning, the fourth transformation has to lead us to a greater goal: a possible feminist democracy.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ursula K. Le Guin, “Coming Back from the Silence”, interview with Jonathan White, in J. White, *Talking on the Water: Conversations about Nature and Creativity*, San Antonio, Trinity University Press, 2016. (A free version of the interview is available at <https://www.swarthmore.edu/Humanities/pschmid1/engl5H/lequin.interv.html>)