

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Civil Society and Feminist Foreign Policies in Latin America

Daniela Sepúlveda

Department of Political Science, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA and New Foreign Policy Center (Chile)
Email: dsepulveda@nuevapoliticaexterior.cl

(Received 14 July 2025; revised 14 July 2025; accepted 16 July 2025)

In the 1980s and 1990s, many Latin American countries transitioned from dictatorships to democracies, paving the way for the structural redesign of their foreign policies. In response to sustained feminist mobilization in civil society, by the 2000s several of these countries had established gender divisions in their Ministries of Foreign Affairs. These divisions prioritized the incorporation of gender equality norms in their national and international legal obligations and established protocols to implement gender equality measures. As part of this process, there was also a push for increased participation of women in the foreign policy arena, especially in Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, and Uruguay (Fuentes-Julio et al. 2022).

This context fostered the emergence of feminist foreign policies (FFP) in Latin America. However, civil society has also played a leading role in advancing this agenda through initiatives like the FFP Mexican Network, the Feminist International in Mexico, the Observatory for Feminist Foreign Policy in Brazil, the Observatory for Women, Peace and Security in Colombia, and the Platform for Feminist Foreign Policy in Latin America (PEFAL) in Chile (Sepúlveda and Papworth, 2023). In this Note from the Field, I provide an overview of the work of PEFAL, which I cofounded in 2022, and its role in exchanging experiences and producing critical and high-quality knowledge regarding FFP projects in the region.

Most organizations working on FFP come from the global North, disseminating policy standards that do not necessarily fit Latin America's challenges, needs, and opportunities. Moreover, our fieldwork revealed that many stakeholders do not read English-language material, making these discussions inaccessible to Latin American policymakers. A key gap filled by PEFAL and other civil society

initiatives has been to produce reports in Spanish drawing on regional findings and experiences to inform local policy design, helping to expand discussions on FFP across Latin America.

The Platform for Feminist Foreign Policy in Latin America (PEFAL)

Launched in 2022, PEFAL is a civil society initiative developed and coordinated by the New Foreign Policy Center. Though based in Chile, it has a regional focus on Latin America. The first of its kind, PEFAL provides a space to exchange experiences and knowledge in Spanish about the production and implementation of FFPs and gender equality norms in foreign affairs in the global South. It also seeks to collaborate with and strengthen the work of Latin American Ministries of Foreign Affairs and local governments. To maintain its independence from governments, PEFAL is funded only by private foundations and philanthropy initiatives that adhere to its mission. We established a rule that PEFAL will not apply for or receive funds from the Latin American governments we analyze, nor will we employ government officials. This approach lends legitimacy to our work, ensuring the autonomy and ethical standards of the professionals who write our policy papers, policy data, index, blogs, and other content of interest.

The first phase of PEFAL's work included the creation of high-quality policy papers aimed at policymakers and policyholders. Written by various Latin American experts, they address topics that governments have identified as key issues in their FFPs: international trade, economic cooperation (Deciancio and Míguez, 2023), climate crisis (Villarreal, 2024), ecofeminist action strategies (Fernández and Gachuz, 2023), subnational diplomacy, local governments (Rodríguez, 2024), political autonomy (Jima-González, 2023), sustainable ecological transition, science, technology (Arellano, 2024), security, peace, and defense (Doebbel, 2023).

We also explore these topics in depth in a monthly podcast available on Spotify, called "*Voces del Sur: Perspectivas Feministas en Política Exterior*" (Voices from the South: Feminist Perspectives on Foreign Policy). Former presidents, foreign ministers, diplomats, political experts, and scientists have been invited to participate in the podcast, which has become a space to informally discuss the challenges and opportunities for women's participation in global politics. The podcast has also served to bring up more uncomfortable questions and reflections on restrictions on women's access to power, institutional resistance in diplomacy, and the contradictions in multilateral organizations that claim to promote their rights.

PEFAL is currently working on a dataset on women's participation in foreign policy. Participation is one of the leading indicators countries use in their goal achievement checklist. However, what the numbers hide is that women are usually relegated to administrative tasks, rather than taking part in relevant teams or positions. To answer the question, "Where are the women?," we are gathering quantitative and qualitative information on women in ministerial cabinets, diplomatic representations, international and regional organizations, armed forces, and local governments, to name a few areas. We will make this data set available to the academic community and decision-makers so that it not only serves as a reliable indicator of the participation and representation of women in

foreign policy, but also exposes the gaps between official narratives and real levels of participation and influence.

Looking Ahead

We know that implementing an effective FFP, as well as promoting an effective decision-making role for women in foreign policy, are goals that will take years to achieve. Real change requires challenging cultural and institutional forms of resistance that are difficult to overcome. However, as a civil society initiative, PEFAL aims to generate concrete and valuable knowledge, discussions, and research with autonomy and responsibility. In recent months, our approach has been replicated locally in other countries such as Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. This work will be both valuable and challenging for civil society, especially given the potential future setbacks for FFPs across the region. In the coming years, our main task will focus on keeping countries accountable to their FFP commitments.

References

- Arellano, Alondra. 2024. "Representación de las mujeres latinoamericanas en instancias regionales y globales de tecnología y desarrollo digital", *Serie de Trabajo Hablemos de Representación* (2), PEFAL, pp. 1–18.
- Deciancio, Melisa; Míguez, María. 2023. "Política Exterior Feminista, Política Comercial y Cooperación Económica Internacional en América Latina", *Serie de Trabajo sobre Política Exterior Feminista* (1), PEFAL, pp. 1–17.
- Doebbel, Stefania. 2023. "Política Exterior Feminista, Política Comercial y Cooperación Económica Internacional en América Latina", *Serie de Trabajo sobre Política Exterior Feminista* (1), PEFAL, pp. 1–23.
- Fernández, Gisele; Gachuz, Geraldine. 2023. "Política Exterior Feminista y Crisis Climática: Bases para una Estrategia de Acción Ecofeminista", *Serie de Trabajo sobre Política Exterior Feminista* (1), PEFAL, pp. 1–17.
- Fuentes-Julio, Claudia, María José Henríquez, Nalaria Escobar, and Pía Lombardo, eds. 2022. *Mujeres y política exterior en América Latina: Un mundo de desigualdades*. Santiago: Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Jima-González, Alexandra. 2023. "Política Exterior Feminista y Alianza Estratégica entre Gobierno, Diplomacia Multinivel, Academia y Sociedad Civil", *Serie de Trabajo sobre Política Exterior Feminista* (1), PEFAL, pp. 1–16.
- Rodríguez, Cecilia. 2024. "Representación de las mujeres en los gabinetes ministeriales de América Latina", *Serie de Trabajo Hablemos de Representación* (2), PEFAL, pp. 1–16.
- Sepúlveda, Daniela, and Evyn Papworth. 2023. "What Can We Say About the Emerging Feminist Foreign Policies in Latin America?" *Global Observatory*, Peace Institute. Accessed March 8, 2025. <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2023/09/what-can-we-say-about-the-emerging-feminist-for-eign-policies-in-latin-america/>.
- Villarreal, María del Carmen. 2024. "Representación de las mujeres en instancias regionales y globales sobre la agenda ambiental y climática", *Serie de Trabajo Hablemos de Representación* (2), PEFAL, pp. 1–24.

Daniela Sepúlveda Soto is a PhD Candidate in Political Science at the University of Minnesota, cofounder of the Platform for Feminist Foreign Policy in Latin America, and Director of the New Foreign Policy Center: dsepulveda@nuevapoliticaexterior.cl

Cite this article: Sepúlveda, Daniela. 2025. "Civil Society and Feminist Foreign Policies in Latin America." *Politics & Gender* 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X25100238>