GENDER UPDATE

Who supports feminist development policy?
Evidence from Germany

Sebastian H. Schneider, sebastian.schneider@deval.org
Alexandra Gödderz, alexandra.goedderz@deval.org
Helge Zille, helge.zille@deval.org
German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval), Germany

Nora Sassenhagen, nsassenhagen@medicamondiale.org
medica mondiale, Germany

Key words development cooperation • feminist development policy • foreign aid • Germany • public opinion • survey

To cite this article: Schneider, S., Gödderz, A., Zille, H. and Sassenhagen, N. (2023) Who supports feminist development policy? Evidence from Germany, European Journal of Politics and Gender, XX(XX): 1–5, DOI: 10.1332/251510821X16877942994234

Introduction

In December 2021, the new German federal government announced a feminist foreign policy in its coalition agreement (SPD et al, 2021). This concept aims at strengthening the rights, representation and resources of women and marginalised groups, and at fostering the recognition of diversity (‘3R+D’) (Federal Foreign Office, 2023; for details on the concept, see Aggestam et al, 2019). In the same vein, Germany’s Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) announced its plans to pursue a feminist development policy (BMZ, 2023). While the German government considered this an innovation and a timely contribution to global gender equality, criticism emerged instantly, for example, by the party whip of the Christian Democratic Union/Christian Social Union (CDU/CSU) faction, Friedrich Merz, in the Bundestag (Bundestag, 2022).

Turning to feminist development policy specifically, opinion polls indicate that the general public, on average, has a sceptical perception of this concept (Sassenhagen et al, 2023). What remains unclear is who supports a feminist development policy. Against this backdrop, we analyse survey data from January 2023 to find out what role political orientation, gender and awareness of the concept play in explaining public support for Germany’s feminist development policy.
Predictors of support

We assume that political orientation and gender are key for predicting support for feminist development policy. Regarding political orientation, ample research demonstrates that political orientation is key when predicting public support for foreign aid. Whereas liberals and those on the left are more likely to be supportive, conservatives and those on the right are more reluctant to endorse public spending in this domain (for example, Milner and Tingley, 2013). This may be due to different conceptions of solidarity with those in need, as well as differing views on the role of the state (for example, Jost et al, 2009). With regard to feminist development policy, we expect a similar pattern. However, as feminism is a polarising issue, differences between the left and the right might be exacerbated. With regard to gender, we expect that women display higher support, as they more likely identify with feminism (Elder et al, 2021) and the goals related to a feminist approach to foreign policy (Stoll et al, 2023). Unclear is the effect of being aware of feminist development policy before being surveyed. Some familiarity with the concept may contribute to having a clearer opinion on this issue.

Data

Our survey data were collected online from 24 to 31 January 2023 by the survey company respondi. The survey gauged knowledge, attitudes and engagement related to development policy. The 2,000 respondents were drawn randomly from the company’s access panel according to representative quotas for age, gender, education and federal state. As our dependent variable, we use an item that after briefly describing the concept of feminist development policy, asks the respondents whether the German government should pursue this policy on a seven-point scale, with higher values indicating higher support. Our key independent variables are party identification (as an indicator of political orientation), gender and awareness of feminist development policy. Age, education, income and region (Western versus Eastern Germany) serve as control variables. The latter is important because substantial differences in public opinion 30 years after German reunification persist (see, for example, Pickel and Pickel, 2023). All items are documented in the online supplementary material (see Tables 1 and 2).

Results

Across the sample, public support is rather high, with an average of 4.96 on the seven-point scale (SD = 1.69). Turning to our regression results in Figure 1, we first find that there is a rift between the left and the right of the political spectrum. Compared to the reference category of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), supporters of the right-wing populist Alternative for Germany (AFD) and the liberal Free Democratic Party (FDP), as well as supporters of the conservative CDU/CSU, display considerably lower support for feminist development policy. The same holds true for those who support another party or do not sympathise with a specific party. In particular, the difference for the FDP supporters is remarkable, as the party is part of the governing coalition. Moreover, supporters of the Left Party show slightly lower support, albeit that the coefficient does not surpass conventional thresholds of statistical significance. This may hint at conflicts within the electorate of the Left Party centring around the debate as to whether traditional working-class or more progressive interests should
be pursued. Supporters of the Greens do not differ significantly from those of the SPD. Second, results display substantial differences between men and women, as women, unsurprisingly, support feminist development policy to a higher degree. Third, awareness of the concept correlates with higher support. Fourth, respondents in the Eastern federal states are more hesitant to support feminist development policy.

Conclusion

Summed up, our analysis, first, hints at a substantial divide between supporters of the two governing parties of the SPD and Greens and supporters of right-wing parties, on the one hand. However, on the other hand, there is also a divide within supporters of the governing parties, as FDP sympathisers deviate from those of the SPD and Greens. This may hint at upcoming tensions within the government following the publication of the feminist foreign and development policy strategy papers in March 2023. Second, a noteworthy gender gap in support exists. More generally, our results imply that a core supporter base for a feminist development policy exists but that it might be hard to convince other parts of the broader public – people with conservative attitudes and men in particular – of this endeavour.
Notes
1 Corresponding author.
2 It should be noted that Sassenhagen et al (2023) did not provide an explanation of the concept to the respondents.
3 The online supplementary material is available at: https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/X313ZY

Funding
The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgements
We thank the editors of the European Journal of Politics and Gender and Martin Bruder for helpful comments and suggestions.

Author biographies
Sebastian H. Schneider works on public opinion on development cooperation and sustainable development at the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) in Bonn, Germany. Among his research interests are political attitudes and behaviour, political sociology, and local politics. He holds a diploma in social science from the University of Oldenburg, Germany, and a PhD in political science from the University of Münster, Germany.
Alexandra Gödderz works on public opinion on development cooperation at the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) in Bonn, Germany. She has a master’s degree in psychology and a PhD in social psychology. She studied stereotypes and prejudice as a research associate at the Social Cognition Center Cologne at the University of Cologne, Germany. Among her research interests are the social cognitive bases of attitudes, implicit attitudes, intercultural psychology and regional gender stereotypes.
Helge Zille works on public opinion on development cooperation at the German Institute for Development Evaluation (DEval) in Bonn, Germany. He holds a PhD in development economics and a master’s degree in global development, both from the University of Copenhagen, Denmark. Among his research interests are industrial development in South-East Asia, international trade, violent conflicts and public opinion.
Nora Sassenhagen works in evaluation, monitoring and quality assurance at medica mondiale in Cologne, Germany. She holds an MSc in intercultural psychology from the University of Osnabrück, Germany. The findings and opinions expressed in this paper are solely those of the author(s). They do not necessarily reflect the views of medica mondiale and have no connection to Nora Sassenhagen’s work there.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

References


