



## GENDER UPDATE

### Who supports feminist development policy? Evidence from Germany

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### 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

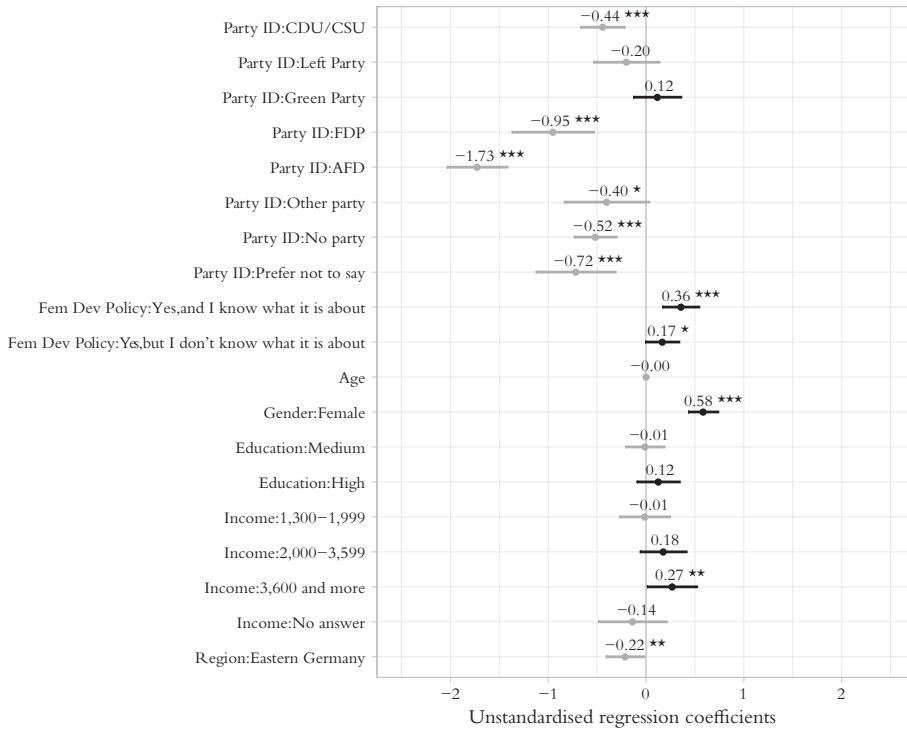
## Data

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](#)).<sup>3</sup>

## 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

**Figure 1:** Ordinary least squares regression of support for feminist development policy



Notes: \*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*  $p < 0.10$ . Confidence intervals and significance tests are based on robust standard errors (type 'HC3'). Reference categories: Party ID = SPD; Feminist Development Policy = No/Don't know; Gender = Male; Education = Low; Income = 0–1,299 euros; Region = Western Germany. For full results, see model M1 of Table 3 in the online supplementary material.

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

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<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that Sassenhagen et al (2023) did not provide an explanation of the concept to the respondents.

<sup>3</sup> The online supplementary material is available at: <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/X313ZY>

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## Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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