Feminist Foreign Policy and Authoritarian Gender Politics: Germany-Azerbaijan Relations

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Feminist thought, feminist approaches and feminist demonstrations have become a global trend that transcends the local, regional and international plane. Consolidated democracies continue to base not only their domestic but also foreign policies on human principles and values by building on internationally adopted resolutions on issues such as human rights, peace and security, and climate change. A vital step forward in this direction is the concept of a "feminist foreign policy," which emerged in 2014 in Sweden in an act of resistance to traditional foreign policy, which is based on patriarchal thinking. This concept questions and suggests ways to revise intergovernmental relations and traditional understandings of security in foreign policy, while prioritizing peace and security, freedom, equality and the environment in foreign policy.

A number of states have developed their foreign policies based on feminist thinking, introducing their own feminist foreign policy guidelines. Countries that have taken this progressive step so far are: Sweden (2014), Canada (2017), France (2018), Luxembourg (2019), Mexico (2020), Spain (2021), Libya (2021), Chile (2022) and Germany (2023). I will focus on the feminist foreign policy of the Federal Republic of Germany. Germany is considered one of Azerbaijan's important partner states in the European Union. It is important to look at Azerbaijan-Germany relations as part of a feminist foreign policy.

Azerbaijan and Germany have diplomatic relations based mainly

on economic cooperation and energy trade. However, in its relations with Azerbaijan, Germany will have to take into account the situation of the rights of women and LGBTQ+ individuals in Azerbaijan, according to the principles contained in its feminist foreign policy guidelines. What is the situation in this area in Azerbaijan? What directions should be the subject of discussion in bilateral relations within the framework of Germany's feminist foreign policy? And what feminist principles does Germany take into account in its relationship with Azerbaijan?

Undoubtedly, cooperation between a democratic state and an authoritarian state in feminist foreign policy ethics can lead to conflict. For example, in 2015, Sweden's foreign minister Margot Wallström was invited to talk to an Arab League meeting, but Saudi Arabia barred her from addressing the meeting, citing her government's position on the situation for women's rights in Saudi Arabia as the reason. A few days after the incident, Sweden ended a 10-year arms trade deal with Saudi Arabia based on feminist foreign policy principles (Spiegel 2015).

In this article, I will first define feminist foreign policy and recap Germany's feminist foreign policy. Then, I will classify the aspects of authoritarian gender politics in Azerbaijan and, against the background of this classification, I will evaluate German-Azerbaijani relations through feminist foreign policy ethics.[1]

What is Feminist Foreign Policy?

Feminist foreign policy is the policy of a state that defines its interactions with other states, as well as movements and other non-state actors, in a manner that prioritizes peace, gender equality and environmental integrity; enshrines, promotes, and protects the human rights of all; seeks to disrupt colonial, racist, patriarchal and male-dominated power structures" (Thompson et al. 2020).

The concept of “feminist foreign policy” was first announced in 2014 by Sweden’s social democratic politician and former Foreign Minister Wallström (2014-2019). In the same year, the government adopted a feminist foreign policy document in support of women’s rights with the necessary resources and increased participation, and for this initiative, Sweden is viewed as the “mother of feminist foreign policy” (Thompson et al. 2021, 2).

The central motivations of feminist foreign policy are intersectionality, empathetic reflexivity, authentic representation, participation, accountability, and active peacemaking. Those who are discriminated against on the basis of gender, class, race, physical limitations, age, and sexual orientation are protected, and their representation and participation in political, social, and economic processes are supported. Politicians and administrators are encouraged to be accountable “not only to institutions and administrations but also to communities and individuals” (Cheung et al. 2021, 8). A *peaceful environment* is not only the absence of war and violence but also the establishment of social justice and well-being. The absence of war and violence is considered passive, incomplete peace. Thus, along with an anti-war stance and opposition to violence, feminist foreign policy also supports policies that ensure social justice and well-being.

Fundamentals of Germany’s Feminist Foreign Policy

Guidelines for Germany’s feminist foreign policy, which entered into force on 1 March 2023, are compiled on the basis of *rights, resources and representation*. Germany’s foreign policy will be implemented in the areas of peace and security; humanitarian aid commitment; human rights; climate and energy foreign policy; foreign trade policy; foreign cultural and social policy based on a feminist perspective. Domestically, the German Federal Foreign Office and Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) will work on changing the working environment and work style. Here,

feminist principles, such as equal representation, diversity and inclusion in public administration; equal opportunities in the workplace, a sexism-free working environment; increasing diplomats' knowledge of gender and diversity; and development of the feminist foreign policy concept are envisaged.

German feminist foreign policy gives priority to disarmament for the sake of peace and security and to combat gender-based violence in armed conflicts. It also emphasizes the involvement of women and marginalized groups in peace-building. In addition, the prosecution of war criminals is part of feminist foreign policy. For instance, Germany supported the Ukrainian authorities in raising awareness about gender-based crime in the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Feminist foreign policy involves combating violations of women's rights in foreign countries and supporting groups impacted by discrimination in the field of human rights. In particular, the protection of reproductive health rights, the eradication of harmful practices such as female circumcision and combatting LGBTQ+ targeted violence and discrimination are prioritized. Among other things, all German embassies show solidarity at Pride events, support human rights projects, advise the governments of countries with LGBTQ+ individuals on their rights, as well as provide LGBTQ+ human rights defenders with visas, protection, etc.

The gender-based challenges caused by the climate crisis and energy problems will be taken into account in feminist foreign policy and further climate and energy policies will be implemented in a way that will avoid such problems. Participation of women and marginalized groups in economic processes, arts, culture, education, media, research and science will also be supported.

Authoritarian Gender Policy in Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan is a secular country, but patriarchal traditions and patriarchal gender order serve the purposes of an

authoritarian government. In Azerbaijan, gender plays a role in stabilizing the current authoritarian system. Perceived as a key component of identity, gender is an aspect that supports the political system in terms of ruling power and legitimacy. The authoritarian state and anti-feminist civil society prevent or delay democratization and modernization of Azerbaijani society in terms of gender relations. Every year since the beginning of 2019, there has been an active rise in the level of retraditionalization, invisible institutional sexism, violation of sexual identity, passing of legislation promoting hierarchical gender order, glorification of patriarchal family institutions, hostility toward LGBTQ+ people, and national anti-feminist trends formed on their basis. These trends are promoted by state officials, members of parliament, civil society representatives, mass media and implemented by neotraditional structures. This regressive change gives us reason to conclude that gender and a patriarchal gender order are among the factors that ensure the continuity of the authoritarian system.

Like other political and social spheres in Azerbaijan, the gender policy is formed mainly by drawing on experiences from Russia and Türkiye: lessons are drawn from these countries' successes and failures in gender policy, with their rightwing gender strategies and legislation being copied and implemented as national gender policies. This process is *the authoritarian learning of gender policy*.[2]

Authoritarian gender policy in Azerbaijan is formed on the basis of *retraditionalization*. Retraditionalization is an attempt to preserve or restore local traditional patriarchal gender relations against the background of liberalization of gender relations and gender order. This regressive move took shape in response to feminist threats that disrupted authoritarian stability after the first transformation of feminism in the country. President Aliyev first officially outlined the direction of retraditionalization in his speech

on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Baku State University (Jalil 2022). Addressing the younger generation, he has noted that his government is building a state on traditional values; there are young-elderly problems, as well as roles of women and men. He also emphasized the importance of men protecting women and the impossibility for Azerbaijanis to live outside traditional thinking (Aliyev 2019). Such an approach reflects the glorification of hierarchical and binary gender order, the glorification of traditional gender roles, the subordination of the young to the elderly and the promotion of patriarchal gender attitudes.

The policy of retraditionalization outlined by Aliyev was later supported by parliament, universities, government agencies and the media. Retraditionalization prevents the political participation of women, mainly from working class; reinforces their obedience on issues such as in judgement of weak governance, in the discussion of poverty, in the institutional exploitation of labour, etc. Thus, women's spirit of protest against structural problems and their potential for political participation are regulated by the patriarchal-capitalist state and authoritarian gender policies are imposed to maintain authoritarian stability.

The main directions of authoritarian gender policy formed on the basis of retraditionalization in Azerbaijan are classified as follows:

1. Gender-based panopticon
2. Hostility to LGBTQ+ people
3. Invisible institutional sexism
4. Protection of patriarchal legislation
5. Promotion of patriarchal family institutions

Gender-based panopticon is the use of sexual information obtained through devices secretly placed in private spaces and by means of cybercrime against political opponents. With a

gender-based panoptic policy, the authoritarian state treats the citizen as an object, not recognizing his/her individual and political autonomy (Jalil 2021). Thus, there are widespread cases of violation of citizens' sexual identity by the state, disclosure of personal information and unauthorized access to personal/private space (Patrucic and Bloss 2021). From 2005 to 2023, there were 15 incidents in which the sexual identity of many citizens was violated at the political level (the list of incidents is attached to the article).[3] The targets are political opponents, journalists, social activists and their female family members, as well as women in the political arena. The aim here is to discredit opponents by disclosing their sexual identity and activity and dissuade them from political participation, while at the same time tabooing and shaming sexuality of all kinds.

Hostility towards LGBTQ+ people is one of the most widespread socio-political phenomena. Among all social groups, the queer community is the only social segment where the most basic human rights are violated and life security is not guaranteed. If we subdivide LGBTQ+ peoples to determine the most vulnerable population, it is generally those belonging to the working class. Since legislation in Azerbaijan is categorized on the basis of a binary gender identity and singular sexual identity (heterosexuality), there is no normative framework protecting the rights of queer citizens. This further increases the cases of their murders, deprivations and persecution. In many cases, public figures such as politicians, human rights defenders, journalists and social media phenomena actively promote hostility towards LGBTQ+ people in society, promoting this hostility through hate speech (QueeRadar 2020, 2021, 2022).

Invisible institutional sexism is not only cases of unfair division of work and duties and lack of women in authority, but also cases of sexual harassment and sexual violence against women in the workplace. Sexual harassment and sexual

abuse of female employees in state-owned enterprises has practically become a code of conduct. Specifically, women working in the arts, such as theater and opera, in government agencies, such as the army and security services, are targeted as sexual objects in their working lives and subjected to sexual harassment (Fem-Utopia 2023). For example, in 2022, Colonel Zaur Mirzayev sexually assaulted women working under him in his office and filmed the acts on a hidden camera (Azadlig Radiosu (Radio of Liberty) 2023). Although the feminist community protested against cases of sexual abuse in state (public) institutions at their demonstration on 8 March 2023, these facts have not been widely discussed at the socio-political level. Protection of the rights of sexually abused women is not provided by the state. Silence against invisible institutional sexism increases cases of sexual abuse.

Cases of *protection of patriarchal legislation* begins with the fact that a number of international organizations, including the UN, have raised the issue of signing and ratifying the Istanbul Convention before the government of Azerbaijan. The majority of the members of Azerbaijan's National Assembly (the Milli Majlis) argued that the Istanbul Convention is unsafe and reject its adoption. For example, Tahir Karimli, deputy chairman of the Human Rights Committee of the Milli Majlis, stated that the convention will not have any positive impact, but will instead endanger the institution of the family (Karimli 2021). Every year feminist and queer civil society organisations issue reports on the state of human rights and propose relevant modifications to gender legislation (Khalilova 2020; Nafas LGBT Azerbaijan Alliance 2020; Jalil 2020). However, such proposals are never the subject of discussion in the Milli Majlis.

The promotion of the patriarchal institution of the family takes place against the backdrop of the decline of the family institution. Because the Azerbaijani state considers the family the foundation of the state, it promotes the sanctity and integrity of the patriarchal family institution and its

protection under the control of the state. Asymmetrical power and subordinate roles, *upward subordination* (the child is subordinate to the mother, the mother is subordinate to the father, the father is subordinate to the state) or *downward control* mechanism (the control of the state over the man, the man over the woman, the woman over the child), i.e., the state encourages patriarchal control within the family.

The Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs is a central executive body that implements and regulates state policy on family, women and gender issues. The committee, together with the Center for Social Research, issued a report entitled "Current Family Relations in Azerbaijan: Socio-Psychological Analysis" in 2021. In the report, the liberalization of the gender order and gender equality is presented as "the Westernization of the value system, the aggressive propagation of neoliberal Western values to the world and their dissemination through the geopolitics of cultural hegemony and cultural imperialism" (Report 2021, 9). The goal here is to legitimize the patriarchal family order to maintain the stability of the authoritarian system by abusing the criticism of neoliberal and colonial-based policies.

The report contains a proposal to establish a Ministry of Family Affairs, an Institute of Family Mediation, and an Azerbaijani Scientific Center for Family Studies. Beyond that, the report considers "the increase in the number of women and men who want to remain single, the increase in the number of those who choose the 'childless family' model, and the increase in the number of divorces compared to the decrease in the number of marriages, as well as the intensification of the normalization of extramarital sexual relations" dangerous trends, and proposes the government introduce a paternalistic and conservative family policy to protect the family (Report 2021, 10). Feminists and LGBTQ+ individuals are called *transformative agents* who are particularly active in the decline of the family (Report 2021, 57).

Germany-Azerbaijan Ties

Germany's foreign policy priority is currently focused on energy trade with the government of Azerbaijan, and human rights violations in Azerbaijan have never hindered the future development of mutual cooperation in this field. Germany cooperates closely with the authoritarian Azerbaijani government precisely for its energy interests, "without taking into account the reality of the human rights situation, the democratic deficit and the freedom of the press, as well as the aggressive foreign policy" (Schutte 2023). Political arrests in the country, media and rights violations triggered condemnation only in 2010-2013, when Herbert Quelle served as ambassador in Azerbaijan. Apart from the regional feminist projects the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the Heinrich Böll Foundation have implemented in recent years, Germany has not pursued any consistent active policy with a feminist orientation in Azerbaijan in the direction of women's and LGBTQ+ rights. Germany's feminist activity in Azerbaijan is limited to having the German Embassy give flowers to women in central Baku on March 8 and the organization of the French-German Gender Equality Prize.

Even after the adoption of feminist foreign policy guidelines, feminist policy is not evident in bilateral relations with Azerbaijan. For example, during Aliyev's visit to Germany on 14 March 2023, the presence of a feminist foreign policy ethic was overlooked in his meeting with Federal Chancellor Olaf Scholz. However, on the eve of this visit, the issue of the situation of women whose sexual identities are violated and at risk of losing their lives due to the gender-panoptic policies of the authoritarian regime in Azerbaijan was on the agenda. Traditionally, energy trade was the main topic of this trip. Scholz's observation in connection with the general political situation in Azerbaijan consisted of the following:

Azerbaijan and Germany are members of the Council of Europe. Through this membership, we committed ourselves to protecting

people’s rights, democracy and the rule of law. We believe that a vibrant civil society is an integral part of democracy because every society can only benefit from a vibrant civil society (Mitschrift Pressekonferenz 2023).

However, the public was not told about what topics, events, and repressive cases had been discussed, leading to failure of ensuring transparency. Political expatriate journalists living in Berlin claimed that until the last day, no information about Aliyev’s visit to Germany was published in advance on the website of any German state institution (Meydan TV 2023).

Germany’s feminist foreign policy guidelines include supporting women’s and LGBTQ+ rights in bilateral relations. This creates the need to maintain the same ethical line with Azerbaijan. This means that although the German government closely cooperates with Azerbaijan in energy security, it should not remain silent about authoritarian gender politics in the partner country and the resulting human rights problems. Germany is therefore at a crossroads in its bilateral relations with Azerbaijan: to continue to prioritize energy trade, reinforcing authoritarian regime stability, or to support feminist civil society, making authoritarian gender politics a subject of discussion, and to defiantly defend women’s rights and LGBTQ+ rights. In the second case, the German government should focus on the above-mentioned trends of authoritarian gender politics of a country with anti-European resentment, as well as the women’s rights and LGBTQ+ violations arising therefrom.

The German institutions that apply feminist foreign policy guidelines in their activities in Azerbaijan are the German Embassy, the Society for International Cooperation (GIZ), and the Goethe Institute (since 2015, no German political foundation has operated in Azerbaijan). In 2014, following amendments to the Law on Non-Governmental Organizations (public associations and foundations), German foundations closed their representative offices in Baku. The three

institutions are centers that implement German feminist foreign policy in Azerbaijan. They also advise the German government on feminist cooperation between the two countries. They are committed to acting in accordance with feminist foreign policy guidelines in the political, economic, and cultural spheres. Making authoritarian gender policies a subject of discussion in bilateral relations, initiating discussions between inter-parliamentary working groups on expanding the normative legal framework for women and LGBTQ+ people, conducting activities to structure and professionalize feminist and LGBTQ+ communities in civil society, and promoting the advancement of women and LGBTQ+ citizens in the fields of science, research, and media are important in the initial phase.

Feminist states must not retreat from the defense of universal principles. Factors such as religion, tradition, culture, trade or economic policy do not give reason to remain silent about violations of women's and LGBTQ+ rights. Azerbaijani feminist and queer activists, feminist and queer communities and progressive individuals should focus on the issue of how to ensure Germany adheres to its feminist foreign policy ethics in relations with Azerbaijan.

Conclusion

No active German feminist foreign policy is found in Azerbaijan. The government of Azerbaijan is creating regressive changes in society through its authoritarian gender policy, using gender-based issues to consolidate its authoritarian stability. Germany needs to discuss authoritarian gender policy directions as part of its feminist foreign policy with Azerbaijan, to negotiate on an expansion of the normative understanding of women's and LGBTQ+ human rights, and to support the feminist and LGBTQ+ communities in Azerbaijan.

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Notes:

[1] Although a request was addressed to the Azerbaijani embassy in Germany and the parliamentary working group on Azerbaijan-Germany inter-parliamentary relations to comment on the potential of Azerbaijan’s cooperation with Germany with regard to feminist policy, none of them expressed any attitude on the

subject.

[2] “Authoritarian Learning von Geschlechterordnung” is my dissertation topic. Here I explore how gender politics are copied, transmitted, promoted and shaped within a network of authoritarian systems.

[3] The list of incidents on violating the personality of opponents and citizens from the opposing camp by the government in political relations in Azerbaijan during the years 1993-2023 is presented in the annexes to the article. This list was compiled together with lawyer Khalid Bagirov.

List of incidences of politically motivated violence against political opponents and members of the opposition in Azerbaijan between 1993 and 2023

#	Year	Description	Form of publication of the material	Reference links
1.	2023	After political activist Bakhtiyar Hajiyev was arrested on political grounds in 2022, his private messages with women and intimate images of these women were stolen from Hajiyev’s social media accounts by cybercriminals and used as a political tool.	Social Media and unknown Telegram channel	Agayev Ismi, “Intimate footage of imprisoned Azerbaijani activist leaked” 27.03.2023 https://oc-media.org/intimate-footage-of-imprisoned-azerbaijani-activist-leaked/
2.	2021	A hidden camera was placed in the apartment of Gunel Hasanli, the daughter of politician Jamil Hasanli, a candidate in the 2013 presidential elections of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and her intimate images were shared as a tool to apply political pressure to her father, Jamil Hasanli.	Social Media	Giyasbayli Hamida, “New sex-tape emerges targeting daughter of Azerbaijani critic “ 30.01.2021 https://oc-media.org/new-sex-tape-emerges-targetting-daughter-of-azerbaijani-critic/

3.	2021	A hidden camera was placed in the bedroom of Zumrud Mirzali, the sister of Mahammad Mirzali, an Azerbaijani blogger living in exile in France, and the images were used as a political tool against his brother.	Social Media	Giyasbayli Hamida, “New sex-tape emerges targeting daughter of Azerbaijani critic “Azerbaijani blogger stabbed in France after sister blackmailed with ‘intimate video’ 17.03.2021 https://oc-media.org/azerbaijani-blogger-stabbed-in-france-after-sister-blackmailed-with-with-intimate-video/
4.	2021	Feminist activist Narmin Shahmarzade was targeted by hackers who stole personal information and intimate materials, which they then published online.	Social Media	Shahmarzade Narmin, “Opinion | In Azerbaijan sex is a weapon” 05.04.2021 https://oc-media.org/opinions/opinion-in-azerbaijan-sex-is-a-weapon/
5.	2021	Private voice messages sent by prominent feminist Gulnara Mehdiyeva in which she details her mental health issues were stolen by cybercriminals and published online.	Social Media	Giyasbayli Hamida, “Leak targets prominent Azerbaijani feminist in run-up to Women’s Day” 26.02.2021 https://oc-media.org/leak-targets-prominent-azerbaijani-feminist-in-run-up-to-womens-day/
6.	2021	Journalist Sevinj Sadigova, wife of political prisoner Afgan Sadigov, was threatened by employees of the State Security Service with hidden camera footage placed in the bathroom of her apartment and the distribution of other personal materials in order to forceher husband to abandon his hunger strike.	Social Media	Toplum TV, 30.03.2021 https://toplum.tv/siyaset/jurnalistin-heyat-yoldasi-meni-intim-goruntulerimi-yaymaqla-santaj-edirler
7.	2020	Personal photos and messages of political activist Ilkin Rustamzade’s ex-wife were circulated and shared through posts titled “Ilkin Rustamzade married a girl with [prior sexual] history,” “Rustamzade’s wife was not a virgin,” and his wife’s photos, videos and phone numbers were posted on escort sites.	Social media	Az-netwatch.org, “Political activist´s partner harrasted online” 08.04.2020 https://www.az-netwatch.org/news/political-activists-partner-harassed-online/

8.	2019	Intimate photos and personal messages of Vidadi Mirkamal, a member of the Coordination Council of the National Council, were released.	Real TV & Social Media	Real TV, 04.11.2019 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wyWY95U0wm0
9.	2019	Intimate videos and photos of activist blogger Fatima Movlamli were published.	Social Media	RFE/RL (Azerbaijani Service) , 20.06.2021 https://www.azadliq.org/a/occrp-jurnalist-arasdirma-pegasus-telefon-xedice-ismayil/31365048.html
10.	2011	Intimate images of Natig Adilov, an employee of *Azadlig* newspaper with close links with the Popular Front of Azerbaijan Party (PFAP) were recorded by a hidden camera placed in a hotel room and then published.	Lider TV & Social Media	Farhadova Aytan, "Azeri Opposition Rocked by Obscene Videos" 02.05.2011 https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azeri-opposition-rocked-obscene-videos
11.	2012	Due to her posts exposing the family business of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan, a hidden camera was placed in investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova's bedroom and sex tapes were later published.	Social Media and traditional media	Grasshoff Z. Friederike, "Der Staat in meinem Schlafzimmer" 20.03.2012 https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/schmutzkampagne-gegen-journalistin-aus-aserbaidschan-der-staat-in-meinem-schlafzimmer-1.1313637 Lomsadze, Giorgi, "Azerbaijani reporter wins sex tape case" Eurasianet.net, 11.01.2019 https://eurasianet.org/azerbaijan-reporter-wins-sex-tape-case
12.	2014	Intimate video footage, which reportedly belongs to Kamala Bananyarli, an activist of the Popular Front of Azerbaijan Party (PFAP), was published.	Social Media	BBC, 31.07.2014 https://www.bbc.com/azeri/azerbaijan/2014/07/140730_kemale_benenyarli_video
13.	2010	Intimate video footage of Azer Ahmadov, executive director of *Azadlig* newspaper, was released.	Lider TV & Social Media	RFE/RL (Azerbaijani Service), 12.10.2010 https://www.azadliq.org/a/2188429.html
14.	2005	Intimate photos of Ganimat Zahid (editor of *Azadlig* newspaper) and Azer Ahmadov (executive director of the newspaper) with Uzbek women at *Uç Palma* restaurant were shared.	Lider TV & Social Media	Farhadova Aytan, "Azeri Opposition Rocked by Obscene Videos" 02.05.2011 https://iwpr.net/global-voices/azeri-opposition-rocked-obscene-videos