

From Aspiration to Action: Implementing Gender Equality at the Municipal Level as Part of an Auditable Feminist Foreign Policy

DOI: 10.61623/ipri-pb.n1.a15

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Executive Summary

The pursuit of gender equality, enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, continues to face a persistent gap between ambitious global targets and their effective implementation. The *Global Gender Gap Report 2025* highlights slow progress, estimating that it will take 123 years to achieve full parity (WEF 2025, 5). In light of this evidence and the research conducted, this Policy Brief is based on the following premise: real and lasting transformation begins at the municipal level. Accordingly, by translating the guidelines of Feminist Foreign Policies (FFPs) to the local scale, this study not only updates the data but also puts forward recommendations and implementation proposals focused on municipalities, understood here as engines of change. The proposals include the creation of gender-based violence monitoring systems, the foregrounding of care work through public services, the training of public servants in gender and intersectionality, and the development of gender-responsive budgeting. The potential impacts of those measures comprise the acceleration of progress toward equality, the building of more resilient communities, and the assurance that the benefits of development reach everyone, thereby strengthening democracy at its foundation.

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Introduction

The global agenda for gender equality, driven by frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda, has gained *momentum* with the adoption of Feminist Foreign Policies (FFPs) by a growing number of countries. These policies propose a reconfiguration of international relations, seeking to dismantle structures of inequality. However, the research conducted reveals a critical implementation gap, namely, the divide between discourse and practice. Put differently, the mere adoption of feminist labels or the creation of ambitious legal frameworks does not, on its own, guarantee substantive transformation.

In light of this challenge, the present document argues that overcoming this gap fundamentally depends on the municipalization of actions. It is at the municipal level, where everyday life unfolds and public policies directly affect citizens, that the governance of gender equality is most likely to become concrete and effective. From this perspective, it is also important to highlight that proximity to the population is one of the key advantages of local governments, as it facilitates the design, implementation, and monitoring of policies that respond to the real and specific needs of their communities, transforming abstract guidelines into tangible outcomes.

This connection between foreign policy and municipal action is not incidental. It constitutes a pillar of important theories underpinning FFPs. Feminist theories of International Relations, which form the basis of FFPs, generally reject the artificial separation between the international and domestic spheres, arguing that security and equality are constructed from lived experiences at the local level, where individuals are not diluted into an anonymous crowd (Philipson & Velasco 2022). In this sense, the effectiveness of an FFP is measured by its capacity to be localized, that is, translated and adapted to the concrete realities of municipalities, a process that the International Relations literature refers to as norm localization (Acharya 2004). It is precisely this localization that enables the well-known implementation gap between global commitments and real change to be overcome. By way of illustration, a country such as Brazil, given its diverse regional realities, would not be able to implement a Feminist Foreign Policy using generalized national indices, as such an initiative would easily be associated with the concept of gender washing, insofar as it would mask stark regional inequalities in, among other areas, the pursuit of gender parity as envisioned in SDG 5. Therefore, the premise of the municipality as the foundation for the construction of a Feminist Foreign Policy does not represent a deviation, but rather a decisive test of the coherence and impact of a foreign policy that claims to be transformative,

aligning with the growing Global Municipal Feminist Movement, which views cities as the fundamental locus of change (UCLG 2025).

Analysis

Global data paint a challenging picture. The *Global Gender Gap Report 2025*, published by the World Economic Forum, indicates that global gender parity has reached only 68.8%, a marginal advance that projects the elimination of inequality to more than a century from now. The North–South divide is pronounced, with high-income economies consistently outperforming middle- and low-income ones. In the labor market, inequality persists: globally, only 46% of women were employed in 2024, compared to 70% of men. Moreover, women earned, on average, 22.6% less than their male counterparts (WEF 2025).

Given these circumstances, the following are some key obstacles that hinder progress toward gender equality, many of which manifest acutely at the local level:

Chart 1 – Systemic Barriers to Gender Equality at Municipal/Global Level

Systemic Obstacle	Manifestation at the Municipal Level
Instrumentalization of Feminism	Gender policies are used for image gains, without the allocation of resources or structural changes, such as the creation of Women’s Secretariats without a dedicated budget.
Ineffectiveness of Quotas	The practice of <i>ghost</i> or <i>token</i> candidacies in municipal elections has undermined women’s political representation, keeping existing power structures unchanged.
Invisibility of Care Work	The overload of unpaid domestic and care work, which limits women’s economic and political participation, is exacerbated by the lack of local childcare facilities and support services.
Bureaucratic Resistance	The lack of knowledge and resistance among municipal civil servants to incorporating a gender perspective and intersectionality into policy formulation continues to perpetuate exclusion.

Source: IBGE 2024, Mendes 2020, CNM 2024, IPEA 2025, TCU 2025, TCU 2023 and Aguiar 2025.

In light of the points outlined above and the real possibility of collecting data that disaggregate each municipality, it is considered that, with a deliberate

and well-funded strategy at the local level, global gender equality goals can move beyond distant aspirations.

Recommendations

To translate global guidelines into local progress, municipal authorities must adopt a pragmatic and structured approach. For this reason, the recommendations below are designed to be implemented with a focus on concrete and measurable actions, within the exclusive scope of municipalities.

The first priority is to *strengthen women's political participation* by going beyond formal quotas. It is necessary to implement robust oversight mechanisms to ensure women's effective participation in local politics, combating fraud such as *ghost* or *token* candidacies and promoting the development of new leadership through mentorship and capacity-building programs.

In Bogotá, Colombia, for example, the Bogotá 50/50 program (2021–2023), a mayoral initiative in partnership with civil society, trained more than 4,000 women for political engagement and created a quarterly monitoring system for women's participation. Focused on capacity-building and oversight, Bogotá invested in resource allocation and the creation of targeted institutional mechanisms as core strategies. Beyond the more than 4,000 women trained through the Political Clinic, women's caucuses were established in the Local Administrative Boards of 18 out of Bogotá's 20 localities, a District Multi-Party Gender Roundtable was created, a quarterly monitoring system with published data on women's participation was implemented, and substantial compliance with the targets was confirmed by an independent evaluation by the Open Government Partnership (Urrea 2025).

In parallel, it is essential to combat gender-based political violence by creating reporting channels and response protocols under the responsibility of City Councils and Municipal Governments. These structures must protect candidates and officeholders, ensuring a safe and democratic political environment.

In Ecuador, a program implemented between 2021 and 2024, focused on rural and Indigenous women, illustrates the effectiveness of an integrated model: it combined the training of over 110 women to identify and report violence with the creation of three local monitoring observatories and the development of an action protocol, resulting in 14 cases being formally reported in remote municipalities (UN Women 2024). The fact that 14 cases were formally reported is the strongest evidence. In communities where

violence is normalized and access to justice is nearly nonexistent, each report represents a break in silence and a demonstration of trust in the system created. In other words, “the success of the program is not evidenced so much by the number of cases reported, but by the fact that the reporting channel was used and fulfilled its purpose.

Another core dimension is *recognizing and valuing care work*. With this in mind, municipalities should develop policies that acknowledge the economic and social value of reproductive labor, such as the creation and/or expansion of childcare networks, community centers for older adults, and community laundries. The objective is to free up part of women’s time for full economic and political participation.

Still focusing on Latin America, and once again highlighting the city of Bogotá, Colombia, the Care Blocks Program deserves to be analyzed, as it is treated as a paradigmatic example of municipal policy (Guevara-Aladino 2024). Through its 20 Care Blocks (*Manzanas del Cuidado*), in operation through 2023, the city brought essential services closer to caregivers, who devoted an average of 13.8 hours per day to unpaid work (Guevara-Aladino 2024, 1113). By offering, within a 15- to 20-minute walking distance, services ranging from community laundries to job-training programs and completion of the equivalent of secondary education, the system benefited more than 233,000 women, freeing their time and promoting economic autonomy (Guevara-Aladino 2024, 1114). Complementarily, Uruguay’s National Integrated Care System, established in 2015 and a regional pioneer, demonstrates in a 2025 study that while freeing time is decisive for economic autonomy, it does not automatically translate into greater political participation (Goyeneche 2025). It can therefore be inferred that care policies create favorable conditions for civic engagement, but must be accompanied by other actions for women to effectively occupy spaces of decision-making and leadership.

The implementation of intersectionality in public policies is equally essential. All municipal gender policies, whether in health, education, urban planning, or public safety, must consider the needs of different groups of women, especially the most marginalized, such as Black, Indigenous, LGBTQIAP+, and women with disabilities. To this end, it is necessary to create advisory committees with diverse representation.

New York has developed a way to institutionalize intersectionality at the municipal level. Through its Commission on Gender Equity (CGE), the city adopts an approach that recognizes race, gender, and other markers as interconnected. In its 2024 annual report, the commission details a series of

policies targeted at specific groups, demonstrating the practical application of the concept. Among the initiatives are new investments in “Pride Health Centers,” which provide health and gender-affirming care for the LGBTQIAP+ community; discussion panels on challenges faced by Black women in the workplace, such as wage disparities; and the creation of a childcare task force involving experts on issues faced by immigrants (NYC CGE 2025). By creating programs and allocating resources based on the specific needs of different groups, New York demonstrates how a municipal administration can move beyond a monolithic gender approach and begin to build truly intersectional public policies.

Equally important for these policies to be effective is the continuous training of public servants. Gender and intersectionality literacy programs must be mandatory for all municipal employees, from frontline service providers to decision-making positions, ensuring that a gender perspective permeates the entire administration.

The city of Barcelona, Spain, shows how training a single senior official can trigger systemic transformation. In 2019, the director of municipal cleaning services, a traditionally male-dominated sector with a workforce that was 75% male, participated in gender perspective training. The experience led him to initiate a diagnostic and action process that became a model for the city. The resulting plan, implemented in collaboration with outsourced companies and unions, ranged from supporting 56 women in obtaining licenses to drive heavy vehicles, a requirement for accessing better-paid positions, to revising pay structures and improving anti-harassment protocols (Change 2025). Inspired by the results, the city is now expanding the approach to other infrastructure sectors, such as public lighting and sewer maintenance, using public procurement terms as leverage to redesign public services through a gender lens.

Finally, it is imperative to ensure adequate and transparent financing. Municipalities should create and monitor an *Orçamento Mulher* (“Woman Budget”) that details the resources allocated to gender equality policies across all departments, ensuring transparency and social oversight through independent audits conducted by Municipal Councils for Women’s Rights.

Continuing with the city of Barcelona, with regard to financing and transparency in the use of resources, the allocation of € 3.8 billion (the 2024 budget) can be examined in the *Relatório de Impacto de Gênero*, a document that assesses how the municipal budget affects gender equality. The city’s

methodology analyzes personnel expenditures, identifies which spending programs exacerbate or reduce the gender gap, and promotes budgetary adjustments to foster equality. Moreover, to ensure transparency and enable social oversight, the city government makes available not only the full report but also the budget databases in open formats (CSV and XLSX) (Ajuntament de Barcelona 2024). This practice of annually publishing a gender impact assessment alongside raw data transforms the budget into an auditable tool and demonstrates a commitment to accountability, allowing citizens and organizations to scrutinize how public resources are being used to promote gender equity.

Proposals for Policy Implementation

Effective implementation requires a clear action plan, with defined stakeholders, allocated resources, and goals that are both feasible and measurable. In this regard, the reader will find detailed proposals for each recommendation below, bearing in mind that they are confined to the municipal context.

Chart 2 – Local Implementation Model for Effective Global Positioning

Recommendation	Actions for Implementation
<p>Strengthen Political Participation</p>	<p>Stakeholders: Electoral Justice (local jurisdiction), Municipal Councils, Political Parties, Municipal Councils for Women’s Rights (CMDM, in Portuguese).</p> <p>Actions: I. The Municipal Council, in partnership with the CMDM, should create an observatory to monitor the allocation and use of electoral fund resources for women’s candidacies.</p> <p>II. Promote mentorship and political training programs for women, in partnership with local universities and NGOs.</p>
<p>Combat Political Violence</p>	<p>Stakeholders: Municipal Council, Municipal Civil Guard, Public Security Secretariat, CMDM.</p> <p>Actions: I. Develop a unified service flow for complaints, including psychological and legal support, managed by the Women’s Prosecutor’s Office within the Municipal Council. II. Conduct annual awareness campaigns on what constitutes gender-based political violence.</p>

Recommendation	Actions for Implementation
Value Care Work	<p>Stakeholders: Secretariats of Social Assistance, Education, and Urban Planning.</p> <p>Actions: I. Map childcare demand by neighborhood and create a multi-year expansion plan with clear targets. II. Launch pilot projects for solidarity kitchens and community laundries in neighborhoods with higher vulnerability.</p>
Implement Intersectionality	<p>Stakeholders: All Municipal Secretariats, coordinated by the Secretariat for Women or an equivalent body.</p> <p>Actions: I. Require that all new municipal public projects and policies include a gender, race, and other relevant intersectional impact analysis. II. Establish advisory committees with representatives from diverse social movements (Black movements, LGBTQIA+ groups, persons with disabilities) to assess policies.</p>
Train the Public Service	<p>Stakeholders: Municipal School of Government, Human Resources Management Secretariat.</p> <p>Actions: I. Make training in gender and intersectionality mandatory for all new civil servants and a requirement for career advancement. II. Develop practical guidelines for different sectors (health, education, public security) on how to apply a gender perspective in service delivery.</p>
Ensure Financing	<p>Stakeholders: Secretariat of Finance, Secretariat of Planning, Municipal Council.</p> <p>Actions: I. Publish the Women’s Budget annually on an easily accessible transparency portal. II. Grant the CMDM autonomy and resources to conduct independent audits of budget execution.</p>

Source: Elaborated by the author based on: TCU 2025, ECLAC 2021, IBAM 2015, Brazil 2024 and Brazil 2019.

Conclusion

Reiterating and reinforcing the premise of this Policy Brief, transforming global gender equality governance into lived reality depends on deliberate and strategic action at the local level. Municipalities are not merely policy implementers, but key agents of change. By adopting the recommendations and proposals outlined herein, municipal governments can bridge the

implementation gap, confront structural inequalities, and build truly just and equitable societies. The task is monumental, but the urgency is undeniable. Investing in gender equality at the municipal level is an investment in stronger democracy, community resilience, and a sustainable future for all.

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