



Gender Responsive Migration Policy as an Instrument of Spanish Foreign Policy in the Mediterranean Region (2020-2024)

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ABSTRACT

This study examines Spain's gender-responsive migration policy as a foreign policy tool between 2020 and 2024, with a focus on the Mediterranean region. Using qualitative methods, VOS viewer analysis, and the frameworks of foreign policy analysis, image theory, and soft power, the research analyses how Spain embeds feminist and human rights values into migration governance to enhance its international image and normative legitimacy. Findings show that Spain increasingly employs migration policy not only to regulate cross-border mobility but also to project itself as a democratic and progressive actor, thereby strengthening its soft power and role as a normative leader in Global North-South relations. Nonetheless, the study identifies a gap between symbolic commitments and practical implementation, hindered by institutional fragmentation, weak gender-sensitive infrastructure, and rising domestic resistance. Despite these obstacles, Spain's gender-responsive migration diplomacy illustrates a significant model for ethical diplomacy, nation branding, and feminist foreign policy in a contested global order.

KEYWORDS

Foreign policy; Gender-responsive migration;
Mediterranean; Soft power; Spain

INTRODUCTION

Spain's southern maritime border, connecting North Africa and Southern Europe, is a significant migration point in the geopolitical landscape ([Triandafyllidou et al., 2024](#)). It reflects historical and structural inequalities rooted in colonialism, economic disparities, and uneven socio-political conflicts between countries of the Global North and Global South ([Prieto-Flores, 2025](#)). Every year, thousands of migrants cross these pathways, with women being the most vulnerable to sexual exploitation, human trafficking, identity-based violence, and restricted access to basic services. This shows that the non-neutral nature of the international migration system is exclusionary based on social, economic, and legal factors ([Cappiali & Pacciardi, 2024](#)).

Migrant women's experiences are complex and multifaceted, influenced by various social categories like gender, race, legal status, and economic background. This complexity necessitates policy responses that are sensitive to injustices experienced in cross-border mobility ([Zhang et al., 2023](#)). The International Organization for Migration reported over 10,500 deaths and missing persons in Mediterranean and Atlantic waters in the last four years, with women and children being the most affected ([European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2024](#)). This highlights the need for a more comprehensive international protection system that addresses the specific needs of vulnerable groups, considering not only security but also legitimacy and state values.

Previous studies show that Spain's migration policy has shifted from a regulatory mechanism to an instrument of value diplomacy. [Fontana & Rosina \(2024\)](#) show that managing migration flows serves to strengthen Spain's regional position and relations with North African countries. In terms of global representation, [Landau-Wells \(2024\)](#) explains that migration policy also acts as a symbolic tool that projects Spain as a democratic and inclusive actor, aligning with image theory's focus on value construction and perception shaping ([Landau-Wells, 2024](#)). Meanwhile, [Murphy \(2023\)](#) emphasize that the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) framework mobilizes migration policies as soft power instruments, embedding principles of social justice, gender equality, and human rights to reinforce Spain's moral legitimacy and international appeal ([Murphy, 2023](#)).

Although previous studies have explored the relationship between migration policy and foreign policy, little attention has been paid to how gender-responsive migration policies function as instruments of value diplomacy to strengthen Spain's normative position and legitimacy, particularly in the Mediterranean and Global North-South context. This study addresses that gap by analyzing Spain's gender-responsive migration policy not only as a domestic response to social challenges, but also as a foreign policy strategy that projects feminist and human rights values through the lenses of foreign policy analysis, image theory, and soft power. In doing so, the research contributes empirical and conceptual insights into Spain's role in mobilizing gender equality as a tool of diplomacy.

This paper is structured as follows. First, it outlines the literature review, followed by a brief explanation of the methods used in this study. Second, it presents the findings and subsequently concludes by highlighting the dynamics, challenges, and broader implications of Spain's value-based diplomacy for feminist foreign policy debates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration policy in international relations is not just a tool for managing cross-border movement but also a means to articulate values and advance diplomacy. The study by [Fontana and Rosina \(2024\)](#) demonstrates that Spain's migration policy, for example, is not just about regulating human movement, but also about shaping external relations with migrant countries, particularly those in North Africa. This approach demonstrates how migration policy can be integrated into value diplomacy, utilizing universal values such as social justice, gender equality, and human rights to enhance a country's international legitimacy and improve its bargaining position in regional and multilateral cooperation. In this case, migration policy is not only technocratic but also symbolic and political ([Fontana & Rosina, 2024](#)).

Furthermore, within the framework of analyzing state representation in increasingly complex global politics, a study conducted by [Landau-Wells \(2024\)](#) shows that state representation in international relations is influenced by cognitive and affective constructs, shaping perceptions of global threats and opportunities ([Landau-Wells, 2024](#)). This aligns with [Herrmann \(2013\)](#), which suggests that a state's image is formed through mental schemas incorporating power, shared goals, and cultural status. Foreign policy, including migration policy, serves as a symbolic tool to build moral legitimacy and strengthen a state's normative position in the global community. Migration policy manages cross-border flows and serves as an instrument of value representation, helping countries like Spain assert their democratic, inclusive identity and commitment to social justice ([Landau-Wells, 2024](#)).

As part of the normative discourse and practice of soft power in migration policy, a study by [Murphy \(2023\)](#) asserts that the Global Compact for Migration (GCM) is a tool for countries to utilize migration policy as a means of soft power, emphasizing universal values such as human rights, solidarity, and gender equality. In Spain, gender-responsive migration policies aim to manage cross-border human flows and enhance the state's image as a normative actor that upholds social justice. This approach leverages the values of feminism and human rights as symbolic resources, enhancing international appeal and bolstering Spain's position in regional cooperation and global forums. Migration policy not only functions administratively but also acts as a tool of value diplomacy, extending the state's moral influence in the Mediterranean region and the North-South configuration of global relations ([Murphy, 2023](#)).

The three literatures offer complementary frameworks for analyzing Spain's migration policy within its foreign policy agenda. First, foreign policy analysis maps how migration

policy serves to strengthen Spain's position in the Mediterranean and promote gender equality internationally. Second, state image studies reveal that migration policy functions as a tool of value representation, shaping Spain's image as a democratic and inclusive actor. Third, the soft power perspective, utilizing the GCM framework, explains how universal values such as feminism and gender equality are mobilized as symbolic capital to enhance Spain's global influence. Together, these perspectives underscore that gender-responsive migration policy holds strategic significance beyond domestic concerns, influencing Spain's diplomacy, international image, and normative power. The following is an overlay visualization of this research's VOSviewer:

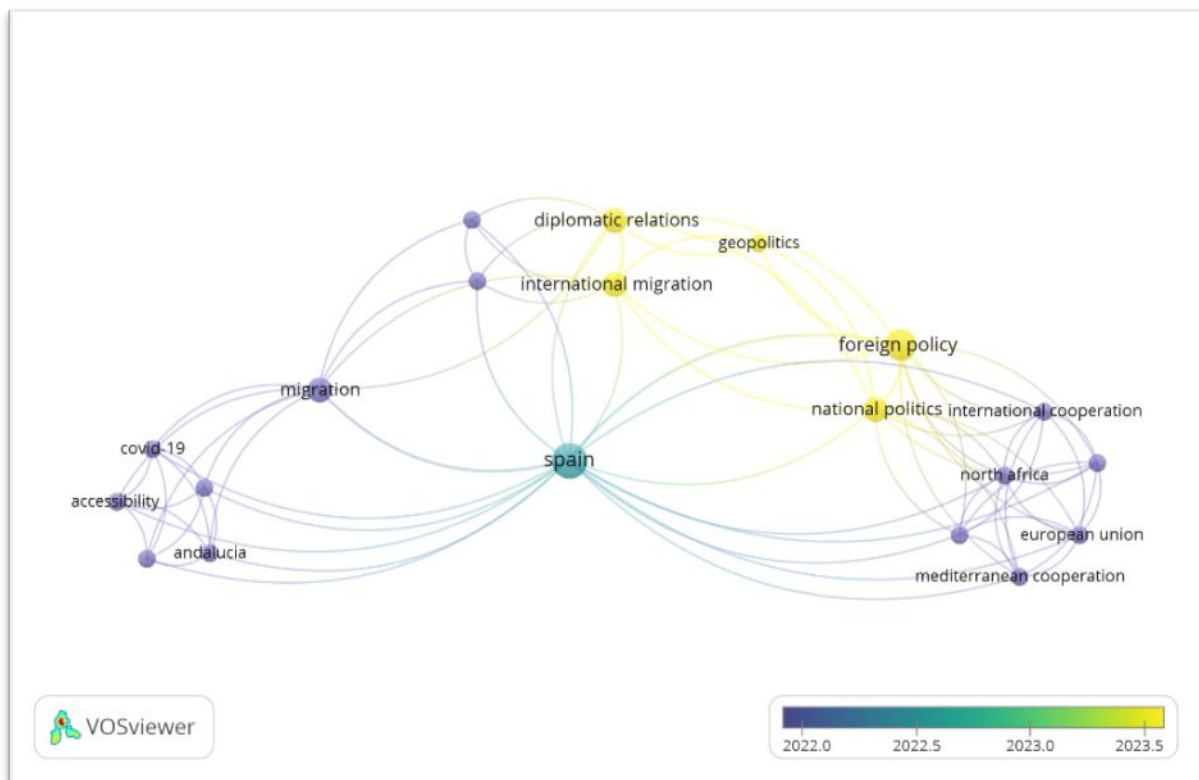


Figure 1. Overlay Visualization

Source: VOSviewer processed by the Author (2025)

This map illustrates the dynamic development of academic studies on Spain's migration policy and international role between 2022 and mid-2023, with "Spain" as a central keyword closely linked to issues such as migration, foreign policy, international cooperation, and geopolitics. At the beginning of the period (2022), much of the research focus was on local issues and responses to the global health crisis, reflected in the linkages between migration, covid-19, andalucia and accessibility, signaling attention to social vulnerability and post-pandemic mobility challenges. Over time, the direction of research began to shift towards regional and global issues, as seen in the emergence of keywords such as north africa, european union, and mediterranean cooperation, reflecting the growing interest in Spain's strategic position in the Mediterranean geopolitical landscape. This trend reaches its highest

intensity in mid-2023, where issues of *foreign policy*, *international migration*, and *diplomatic relations* dominate the discourse, signaling that migration is beginning to be interpreted as an instrument of foreign policy and part of the country's image strategy. Overall, the map shows a thematic transition from local and structural approaches to more interdisciplinary and strategic studies, reflecting how migration policy in Spain not only addresses domestic issues but is also positioned as a tool of diplomacy and affirmation of the country's normative identity at the international level.

The *foreign policy analysis* approach in international relations studies offers a conceptual framework for understanding foreign policy as a product of the interaction between strategic interests, the construction of national identity, and the dynamics of the domestic and international systems ([Hill, 2003](#); [Hudson, 2005](#)). Foreign policy in this approach is not positioned as a neutral technocratic response, but rather as an articulated arena full of values and ideologies ([Dal & Kurşun, 2016](#)). In the context of migration policy, this analysis explains that state decisions in regulating cross-border mobility are not only motivated by material interests, but also by normative and symbolic aspirations that the state wants to assert in international forums ([Sältenberg et al., 2025](#)). In this sense, Spain's migration policy that mainstreams the principle of gender equality represents a shift from the border security paradigm to *normative diplomacy*, where the protection of migrant women, especially those from Global South regions such as North Africa, is mobilized as part of a foreign policy strategy oriented towards the projection of progressive identities ([Soler i Lecha & Barbé, 2021](#)). Such policies not only reflect a response to internal demands for social justice, but also serve to strengthen Spain's bargaining position in multilateral forums and create normative solidarity with partner countries in the Mediterranean region ([Collyer, 2016](#)).

As a conceptual complement, the *image theory* approach in international relations as proposed by [Herrmann \(2013\)](#) provides a sharper framework in explaining how states form strategic representations of themselves through deliberate perceptual construction. This theory emphasizes that state images are not passive outcomes of external observations, but rather cognitive and affective constructions formed by the interaction between perceptions of goal interdependence, relative power, and cultural status. These images function as *mental schemata* that not only shape the interpretation of new information but also form the basis of moral judgment and strategic behavior ([Herrmann, 2013](#)). In the Spanish context, the integration of gender equality principles into migration policy can be understood as part of the construction of the image of a "democratic and progressive country" that it wants to communicate to the international community ([Sältenberg et al., 2025](#)). Gender mainstreaming in this policy is not only intended as social protection for vulnerable groups, but also as a form of value projection that strengthens Spain's symbolic legitimacy as a pioneer of global feminism and European inclusiveness ([Cabezas, 2022](#)). Through this kind of representation, Spain distinguishes itself from other European countries that tend to

maintain a closed and exclusive image, especially on the issue of cross-Mediterranean migration ([Fernández-Molina & Tsourapas, 2024](#)).

In the influence dimension, the concept of *soft power* as developed by [Nye \(2004\)](#) explains how states build the capacity to influence international actors not through military threats or economic pressure, but through the appeal of values, political culture, and policy legitimacy ([Nye, 2004](#)). In this framework, feminism and gender justice issues serve as symbolic resources that can be mobilized in value diplomacy ([Chitty et al., 2017](#)). Spain's gender-responsive *migration* policy, which adopts the principles of the *Global Compact for Migration* (GCM) and mainstreams a human rights-based approach, serves as a *soft power* instrument to extend the country's moral and normative influence ([Viola et al., 2019](#)). This approach shows that feminist values not only function as a domestic normative framework but also as a strategic asset in Spanish foreign policy ([Rother, 2022](#)). Thus, the policy becomes a channel for the articulation of universal values that strengthen the country's position in Mediterranean regional relations as well as global forums that emphasize cooperation based on social justice and human rights ([Pécoud, 2021](#)).

The integration of foreign policy analysis, image theory, and soft power offers a comprehensive lens for understanding Spain's gender-responsive migration policy as a multidimensional foreign policy instrument. Through foreign policy analysis, the policy can be seen as an articulation of strategic interests, identity construction, and domestic–international dynamics ([Hill, 2003](#); [Hudson, 2005](#)). Image theory highlights Spain's effort to project itself as a democratic and progressive state by symbolizing value-based policies, including gender mainstreaming in migration ([Sältenberg et al., 2025](#)), while the concept of soft power explains how feminist and human rights values are mobilized as symbolic resources to expand influence and international legitimacy ([Kaunert et al., 2024](#)). All three perspectives demonstrate that gender equality–based migration policies not only address domestic challenges but also serve as strategic tools to strengthen Spain's normative position in both the Global North and the Global South, particularly within the Mediterranean's complex geopolitical landscape.

METHODS

This research employed a qualitative approach, specifically descriptive analysis of policy documents, academic literature, and reports from international institutions. In searching for research updates, the researchers used VOSviewer through Scopus with the keywords "spain", "migration", "foreign policy", which produced 25 datasets that were then exported in RIS format, and processed through co-occurrence analysis by selecting citation information, bibliographic information, abstracts, keywords, and other information. Next, the data was processed using VOSviewer by selecting the "create map based on bibliographic data" option, then selecting a threshold with a minimum accuracy count of 1 out of 75 keywords,

which met the 75 thresholds. This threshold selection resulted in 4 clusters, 44 links, and 50 total link strengths.

This visualization offers an overview of academic developments on Spain's migration policy and international role from 2022 to mid-2023. Early studies focused on local issues related to the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting social vulnerability and post-pandemic mobility patterns. Over time, attention shifted toward regional and global themes, including Mediterranean cooperation, North African relations, and EU migration integration. By mid-2023, foreign policy and international migration had dominated the discourse, highlighting the role of migration as a tool for foreign policy and image-building. This bibliometric approach enriches the analytical context and supports narrative mapping of how gender-responsive migration policy is framed within Spain's foreign policy in the Mediterranean.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dynamics of Spain's Migration Policy Strategy in the Maritime Border Region

Spain's geographical location as a transition point between North Africa and Europe makes it a key actor in the contemporary global migration landscape ([Triandafyllidou et al., 2024](#)). The southern maritime border represents not only a cross-border zone but also an arena where structural inequalities, geopolitical tensions, and international policies interact intensely ([Vives, 2017](#)). Data from the International Organization for Migration shows that between 2021 and 2023, more than 87,000 migrants arrived in Spain by sea. Of these, almost 40% are women and children, marking a crucial gender dimension in the context of rights protection and vulnerability in border areas ([Mcauliffe et al., 2022](#)).

[Hudson \(2005\)](#) argues that migration policy is not just a technocratic response to population movements, but an arena reflecting national strategic interests, state identity construction, and domestic and international dynamics within the Foreign Policy Analysis framework ([Hudson, 2005](#)). Spain's position as an external border state of the European Union (EU) places it in a dual role: as an actor responsible for border control and as a representation of European values in the management of human mobility ([Ferreira, 2018](#)). However, geopolitical pressures remain a significant challenge, as reflected in the 2021 Ceuta crisis, which involved an influx of over 8,000 migrants in two days due to diplomatic tensions between Madrid and Rabat. This event confirmed that migration policy is always political and vulnerable to being used as a negotiating tool between states ([Ferrer-Gallardo & Gabrielli, 2022](#)).

The transformation of Spain's migration policy approach from a security paradigm to value diplomacy reflects a deeper change in orientation than just migration administration ([Esteveens, 2018](#)). If in the early 2000s Spanish migration policy was dominated by *hard security* strategies in the form of building border fences, expanding *Centros de Internamiento de Extranjeros* (CIEs), and tightening security cooperation, the following decade saw a reorientation towards a normative approach ([Koliou, 2020](#)). Since 2020, Spanish migration

policy has explicitly adopted universal values such as social justice, gender equality and human rights. Policies such as the *Plan Nacional contra la Trata de Seres Humanos* (2021-2025) and the *Estrategia Nacional para la Igualdad de Trato y No Discriminación* (2022-2026) reflect the integration of feminist and human rights values into foreign policy ([Lombardo et al., 2025](#)). This approach shows that the protection of migrants, especially women, is not only seen as a moral imperative, but also as part of a state's identity strategy in global politics ([Sältenberg et al., 2025](#)).

The implementation of such value-based policies not only serves to strengthen domestic legitimacy but also becomes part of the articulation of strategic interests in Spanish foreign relations. In the context of relations with migrant origin and transit countries in North Africa, such as Morocco and Mauritania, the diplomatic approach used by Spain avoids coercive domination and emphasizes solidarity-based development cooperation ([Fine & Torreblanca, 2019](#)). Programs such as *Ellas Viajan Seguras*, run by the *Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo* (AECID), demonstrate how the principles of feminism and social justice are translated into concrete policies ([ONU Mujeres, 2019](#)). The program provides migrant women in high-risk situations with access to job training, legal aid, and reproductive health services. As of 2024, more than 9,000 women have directly benefited from the program in Morocco and Senegal ([Martinez, 2024](#)). This approach is in line with Hill's view that foreign policy can be an arena for the negotiation of values and identities, as well as a medium for states to build external relations that are not based on domination, but rather equality ([Hill, 2003](#)).

Based on the bibliometric analysis conducted using VOSviewer on 25 datasets, four main clusters were identified with a total of 44 interconnections among concepts. The first cluster highlights the linkage between diplomacy and international migration; the second cluster focuses on issues of national identity and international representation; the third cluster emphasizes the close relationship between gender equality, human rights, and migration governance, while the fourth cluster addresses Mediterranean cooperation and relations with migrant-sending countries such as Morocco. The coexistence of gender equality and foreign policy, emerging in the third cluster, indicates that feminist dimensions are increasingly regarded as an integral component of Spain's external representation. Accordingly, this mapping reinforces the argument that Spain's migration policy is not merely administrative in nature, but also functions as a foreign policy instrument aimed at constructing a progressive and feminist image on the global stage.

According to [Herrmann's Image Theory \(2013\)](#), a state's image is constructed through cognitive and affective processes developed in international interaction. Cognitively, it reflects how a state interprets its position, objectives, and norms, while affectively it embodies symbolic pride and moral legitimacy. Thus, a state's image serves not only as a reflection of domestic identity but also as a strategic tool that shapes foreign policy formulation and implementation ([Herrmann, 2013](#)). In the Spanish context, the self-image as

a progressive, democratic, and feminist nation has been deeply rooted since the post-Franco political transition in the late 1970s ([Encarnación, 2003](#)). This collective identity has become a cognitive element that frames the way the country understands international issues, including migration, not only through the perspective of security, but also through the values of gender equality, human rights, and global solidarity ([Benítez, 2016](#)). At the same time, domestic achievements in gender equality and international recognition of the Spanish feminist movement fostered a collective sense of affective pride, which was then mobilized to bolster Spain's image as a pioneer of feminism and democracy in Europe and the international community ([Zhukova, 2023](#)).

The consistency between Spain's domestic identity and external representation can be traced through various normative policies ([Benítez, 2016](#)). In 2004, the government passed the *Ley Orgánica de Medidas de Protección Integral contra la Violencia de Género*, which marked a progressive legal commitment to protecting women from gender-based violence ([Cubells & Calsamiglia, 2018](#)). Furthermore, in 2007, the *Ley Orgánica para la Igualdad Efectiva de Mujeres y Hombres* was published, strengthening the principle of gender equality in the political, economic, and social spheres. These two legal instruments reflect the internalization of progressive-feminist values in domestic policy. At the external level, the continuity of this identity was then realized through the *Política Exterior Feminista* (2021), which officially made gender equality a cross-sectoral principle in Spanish foreign policy.

The mobilization of progressive-feminist imagery is increasingly evident in Spain's migration policy for the period 2020–2024. The *Ellas Viajan Seguras* program, run by AECID in Morocco and Senegal, provides access to job training, legal assistance, and reproductive health services for migrant women, translating feminism into concrete development cooperation ([Ministerio de Inclusión Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 2024](#)). In addition, the *Plan Nacional contra la Trata de Seres Humanos* (2021–2025) and the *Estrategia Nacional para la Igualdad de Trato y No Discriminación* (2022–2026) affirm the integration of gender equality principles into the migration regulatory framework ([Villacampa et al., 2022](#)). Spain is also active in multilateral forums such as the Global Compact for Migration, promoting a human rights-based and feminist approach ([UN Network on Migration, 2022](#)). However, practices in the border regions of Ceuta and Melilla still demonstrate the dominance of a security logic, including 'devoluciones en caliente' (hot returns), as recorded in 2023 ([Amnesty International, 2022a](#)). This contradiction reveals a tension between normative representation and factual implementation in Spanish migration policy ([Echeverría, 2024](#)).

From the perspective of Image Theory, this dynamic confirms that gender-responsive migration policy is not merely a peripheral addition, but rather the core of Spain's representation strategy in the international arena ([Giovanis & Akdede, 2021](#)). The progressive-feminist identity that is constructed cognitively and affectively not only strengthens domestic legitimacy but is also utilized as a source of soft power to expand normative influence in the context of the European Union and relations with Global South

countries ([Zhukova, 2023](#)). However, the credibility of this image depends on the consistency between normative narratives and implementation practices. If the contradiction between feminist symbolism and exclusionary policies at the border continues, Spain's normative appeal risks erosion ([Sahraoui, 2020](#)).

In the European foreign policy landscape, gender equality has gained significant ground, but its implementation tends to be sectoral and technocratic ([Ion et al., 2025](#)). Most European countries place gender equality within the framework of normative diplomacy, development aid, or human rights diplomacy, without making it a binding cross-sectoral principle ([Welfens, 2020](#)). Sweden, for example, was considered a pioneer through its Feminist Foreign Policy in 2014, but the policy was discontinued in 2022 due to domestic political changes ([Petö et al., 2025](#)). France promotes *diplomatie féministe* focused on Francophone regions and development programs (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018), while Germany emphasizes gender as part of human rights diplomacy, limited to specific issues ([Färber, 2025](#)). Thus, despite their commitments, these countries' policies tend to be fragile in the face of domestic political changes or limited to specific sectors ([Karlsen, 2024](#)).

Spain occupies a different position through the launch of *Política Exterior Feminista* (2021), which is designed not as a short-term declaration, but as a medium- to long-term strategy with concrete operational instruments ([Government of Spain, 2021b](#)). Unlike other European countries, Spain integrates the principle of gender equality into all aspects of foreign policy, from multilateral diplomacy and development policy to regional cooperation with Latin America and Africa ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs European Union and Cooperation, 2025](#)). Spain's strength also lies in its strong domestic legal legitimacy, particularly through the 2007 Gender Equality Act and the 2004 Gender Violence Act, which provide a normative basis for the articulation of feminist foreign policy ([Villacampa, 2024](#)). In addition, the establishment of a special unit within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with measurable performance indicators demonstrates an institutional orientation towards sustainability, ensuring that this policy is not dependent on short-term political cycles ([Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2023](#)).

The fundamental difference between Spain and other European countries lies in its institutional consistency, cross-sector integration, and use of its national image as a progressive and feminist country ([Guerrina, 2023](#)). While Sweden emphasizes normative leadership ([Rosén Sundström & Elgström, 2020](#)). France highlights its geopolitical influence in the Francophone region (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, 2018), and Germany promotes a technical approach to human rights; Spain presents a more comprehensive and multilaterally oriented model of feminist policy ([Färber, 2025](#)). With this strategy, Spain not only follows gender policy trends in Europe but also offers a new paradigm that can be used as a reference in discussions of feminist foreign policy at the global level ([Zhukova, 2023](#)). This model confirms a shift from a sectoral approach to a sustainable cross-sectoral strategy,

while also positioning Spain as a European actor that systematically articulates feminist values in international diplomacy ([Fernández-torres, 2025](#); [Zhukova, 2023](#)). Thus, Spain is not only following developments in gender policy in Europe, but also adding a significant perspective to the academic debate on feminist foreign policy at the international level ([Zhukova, 2023](#)).

Since its initial launch in 2021, the *Política Exterior Feminista* (PEF) has been established as an official document of Spanish diplomacy by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Europe, and Cooperation (MAEC). This document is not merely a momentary normative declaration, but rather a strategic framework that serves as a reference for Spain's foreign policy in the medium to long term ([Government of Spain, 2021a](#)). This is evidenced by the follow-up report in 2022 and the drafting of the 2023–2024 Action Plan, which explicitly states that the PEF is integrated into the *Estrategia de Acción Exterior* 2022–2024. Thus, its validity extends beyond 2021 and remains the main guideline for Spanish diplomatic practice until at least 2024 ([Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2024](#)).

The contents of the official document emphasize that '*La igualdad de género constituye un principio transversal de toda la acción exterior española*', meaning that gender equality is a cross-sectoral principle in all Spanish diplomatic actions. Thus, gender equality is positioned both as a cross-cutting principle and a foreign policy priority and is integrated into every practice of external diplomacy ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs European Union and Cooperation, 2024](#)). This statement shows that the integration of a gender perspective is not an additional component, but rather a comprehensive framework for every diplomatic instrument, from development cooperation and migration policy to participation in multilateral forums.

The applicability of PEF until the 2022–2024 period is confirmed through the *Plan de Acción* 2023–2024, which serves as an operational guide to ensure consistency in the application of feminist principles in diplomacy ([Ministry of Foreign Affairs European Union and Cooperation, 2023](#)). The document affirms that gender equality will continue to be promoted in Spain's foreign policy, positions, instruments, and action programs ([Government of Spain, 2021a](#)). Thus, the PEF has been positioned as both a normative foundation and a binding technical framework for Spanish diplomatic practice during the last two years of the foreign policy strategy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Cooperation European Union and, 2021).

The implementation of these feminist principles is evident in several concrete policies during the 2022–2024 period. For example, the *Ellas Viajan Seguras* program run by the *Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo* (AECID) provides protection, training, and access to basic services for migrant women in high-risk areas such as Morocco and Senegal. At the multilateral level, Spain is also actively promoting a gender perspective in the 2022 Regional Review of the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), in which the country is cited as one of the best practices in the protection of women and child migrants

([United Nations Network on Migration, 2020](#)). Furthermore, within the framework of EU-Africa cooperation, Spain advocates for the integration of gender and women's empowerment agendas as part of migration and development policies across the region ([Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2021](#)).

With official quotations from PEF documents, evidence of policy continuity through the 2023–2024 Action Plan, and concrete implementation in bilateral programs and multilateral forums, it can be concluded that *Política Exterior Feminista* is not merely a political symbol ([Mesa, 2024](#); [Coquisart&Nerva, 2024](#); [Zhukova, 2023](#)). Instead, it functions as a long-term representation instrument that reinforces Spain's normative image as a progressive and feminist country on the international stage ([Alonso, 2023](#)). This continuity also shows that PEF has a dual role, namely as an internal guide for the diplomatic apparatus and as an external legitimation device that strengthens Spain's position in a value-based global order ([Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2021](#); [Thomson, 2022](#)).

More than a mere instrument of branding, Spain's representational strategy reflects a form of soft power in [Nye's \(2004\)](#) sense. Within this framework, Spain mobilizes the values of feminism and human rights as symbolic resources to build influence without coercive means ([Petö et al., 2025](#)). The gender-responsive migration policy adopted by Spain not only operates within a domestic framework but also serves as a diplomatic tool for building normative solidarity with Global South countries and consolidating Spain's position in the international system ([Crawley & Teye, 2023](#)). This orientation resonates with the *Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration* (GCM) 2018, which explicitly incorporates feminist principles through a gender-responsive approach and the empowerment of women in global migration governance. The GCM underscores that “the human rights of women, men, girls and boys are respected at all stages of migration, that their specific needs are properly understood and addressed and that they are empowered as agents of change” ([United Nations, 2018b](#)). This principle is reinforced in Objective 7, which emphasizes the elimination of discrimination against women migrants, the provision of reproductive health services, protection from gender-based violence, and migration policies sensitive to gender-based vulnerabilities. Thus, the GCM does not merely regulate the technical aspects of migration but also positions gender equality and women's empowerment as normative foundations guiding member states, including Spain, in formulating just migration policies ([UN Women, 2021](#)).

Spain has emerged as one of the most active states in supporting the drafting, adoption, and implementation of the GCM. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Spain emphasized early on its position as “a strong supporter of the GCM,” actively participating in negotiations and submitting periodic follow-up reports ([MAEC, 2020](#)). In the 2018 UN General Assembly session in Marrakech, Spain reaffirmed its commitment to defend the GCM as an embodiment of multilateralism grounded in human rights ([United Nations,](#)

[2018a](#)). At the regional level, Spain also promoted the Gender Action Plan within the framework of EU–Africa migration cooperation and integrated a feminist approach into the Spain–Africa Strategy 2025–2028, which explicitly prioritizes the empowerment of African women and girls ([MAEC, 2024](#)). These initiatives demonstrate that feminism, for Spain, functions not only as a normative ethic but also as a calculative and articulative strategy in diplomacy, reinforcing its international image as a progressive and feminist state ([Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores Unión Europea y Cooperación, 2023](#)).

In this regard, the dynamics of Spanish migration policy, particularly in the maritime border regions, cannot be separated from complex and multilevel foreign policy considerations ([Gabrielli, 2023](#)). The policy is not merely a reactive measure to migratory pressures from the South but also an instrument to project national identity, strengthen symbolic legitimacy, and expand diplomatic influence through the promotion of feminism, social justice, and global solidarity ([Zhukova, 2023](#)). As [Osuna \(2024\)](#) suggests, Spain employs migration policy not only to manage physical borders but also to regulate symbolic boundaries of exclusion and inclusion within the architecture of contemporary international relations. This indicates that Spain’s engagement with migration governance is embedded within broader strategies of normative projection and identity construction in global politics ([Osuna, 2024](#)).

Challenges in Implementing Spain's Gender Responsive Migration Policy

Although Spain presents itself as a pioneer of feminist foreign policy, the implementation of gender-responsive migration policies reveals significant gaps between normative commitments and field practices ([Zilla, 2024](#)). Detention centers for migrants (CIE) remain poorly equipped, with only two of eight facilities providing limited services for women ([SIM, 2023](#)). Reports also indicate that 64% of migrant women in Ceuta and Melilla feel unsafe, with nearly half lacking access to legal information ([Amnesty International, 2022b](#)). These shortcomings highlight an implementation divide that undermines Spain’s credibility as a promoter of global feminism ([Gazzotti, 2023](#)). Domestic political resistance further complicates the situation, as the growing influence of the right-wing party Vox has fueled rejection of gender mainstreaming in some regions ([Maza & Hierro, 2025](#)).

A second challenge lies in limited institutional capacity and the persistence of security-driven approaches. More than 60% of frontline officers lack training on gender and intersectionality, which hinders the effective translation of progressive commitments into local practice ([Calderon et al., 2023](#)). Meanwhile, Spain continues to implement measures such as *devoluciones en caliente* without conducting gender-sensitive assessments ([Melilla, 2023](#)), while the majority of migration aid to North Africa prioritizes security stabilization (61%) over women’s empowerment (17%) ([Olivie, 2022](#)). These patterns reveal contradictions between Spain’s feminist commitments and its dominant security logic, which risks weakening its normative appeal internationally ([Aggestam & True, 2020](#)).

Finally, structural barriers also emerge from weak inter-agency coordination and insufficient involvement of civil society. Ministries and agencies often pursue fragmented priorities with limited inter-ministerial mechanisms ([Iglesias et al., 2024](#)). At the same time, formal coordination forums with NGOs and migrant women's networks exist in only 27% of administrative regions, leaving participation sporadic and non-institutionalized ([United Nations Network on Migration, 2022](#)). These challenges demonstrate that Spain's gender-responsive migration policies remain caught between symbolic articulation and structural transformation ([Cubero, 2023](#)). From a foreign policy perspective, this reflects unresolved tensions between normative identity and strategic interests, while from a soft power perspective, inconsistent implementation risks eroding Spain's moral appeal and international legitimacy ([Gabrielli, 2023](#)). Without stronger institutional reform, local capacity building, and sustained state-civil society collaboration, Spain's feminist diplomacy risks remaining a symbolic projection rather than a transformative policy framework ([Verge, 2024](#)).

The Impact of Spain's Gender Responsive Migration Policy

Spain's gender-responsive migration policy represents a shift from migration management toward a foreign policy instrument that projects feminist values and reinforces its progressive identity in global governance ([Hill, 2003](#); [Hudson, 2005](#)). Programs such as the *Plan Nacional contra la Trata de Seres Humanos* (2021–2025) and the *Estrategia Nacional para la Igualdad de Trato* (2022–2026) illustrate how migration has been mobilized as value diplomacy ([Lombardo et al., 2025](#)). At the domestic level, more than 120 integrative centers provided reproductive health, counseling, and legal aid for migrant women by 2023 ([Ministerio de Inclusión Seguridad Social y Migraciones, 2024](#)), while participatory initiatives such as the *Red de Atención Integral a Mujeres Inmigrantes* in Andalusia support victims of gender-based violence ([Acoge, 2023](#)). Nonetheless, OBERAXE (2023) found that services remain uneven, concentrated in wealthier regions, with border areas like Ceuta and Melilla facing shortages and limited gender-sensitive training among officers ([Mahía & Medina, 2024](#)), reflecting a persistent gap between national commitments and local implementation ([Schiller, 2017](#)).

Internationally, Spain has solidified its normative position by integrating feminist and human rights perspectives into its migration diplomacy. It was highlighted in the 2022 Global Compact for Migration Regional Review as a best practice country in protecting women and child migrants ([Karlsen, 2024](#)) and spearheaded gender mainstreaming in EU–Africa cooperation through initiatives such as *Ellas Viajan Seguras* in Morocco and Senegal, benefiting more than 9,000 women since 2021 ([Jiménez-Martínez & Dolea, 2024](#)). Between 2021 and 2023, AECID supported over 20 cooperation projects in North Africa, with a focus on gender equality ([La Moncloa, 2023](#)). This effort strengthened Spain's image as a normative leader compared to other European countries, which had prioritized restrictive

security approaches ([Zhukova, 2023](#)). From a soft power perspective, these initiatives contribute to constructing Spain's democratic and feminist identity in global politics ([Herrmann, 2013](#)). This recognition from ICMPD and IOM (2024) lists Spain among the top European references for gender-responsive migration policies, a status also replicated in Tunisia and Senegal ([McAuliffe & Oucho, 2024](#)).

Despite these achievements, Spain's normative appeal remains fragile without deeper institutionalization. Only 40% of migrant integration programs are equipped with gender-based monitoring frameworks ([Giovanis & Akdede, 2021](#)), while public support for feminist policy agendas declined from 61% in 2020 to 49% in 2023 ([UNHCR, 2025](#)). This gap between ambitious rhetoric and uneven practice threatens Spain's credibility as a normative power ([Silva & Pereira, 2023](#)). Overall, while Spain has effectively projected feminist commitments through bilateral, regional, and multilateral frameworks ([Achilleos-Sarll et al., 2023](#); [Rydzewska, 2025](#)). Ensuring long-term legitimacy requires bridging structural divides at home and strengthening evaluative mechanisms. Without such reforms, Spain's feminist diplomacy risks remaining a symbolic projection rather than a transformative framework in ethical migration governance ([Guerrina, 2023](#); [Karlsen, 2024](#)).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Spain's gender-responsive migration policy between 2020 and 2024 has served not only to regulate mobility but also to advance foreign policy objectives. By embedding feminist and human rights values, Spain has projected itself as a progressive state and leveraged migration governance as a tool of soft power, nation branding, and value-based diplomacy. Initiatives such as *Ellas Viajan Seguras*, the *Plan Nacional contra la Trata de Seres Humanos* (2021–2025), and the *Estrategia Nacional para la Igualdad de Trato* (2022–2026) illustrate how gender equality has been institutionalized in bilateral and multilateral frameworks, thereby reinforcing Spain's normative legitimacy and leadership in Global North–South relations.

At the same time, the findings reveal enduring challenges, including institutional fragmentation, limited gender-sensitive infrastructure, and growing domestic resistance. Contradictions between Spain's progressive image abroad and its security-oriented practices at border regions risk undermining its normative credibility. Addressing these gaps requires stronger institutional coordination, expanded local capacity building, and broader public support to ensure feminist principles translate into practice. Conceptually, the study highlights migration policy as a form of ethical diplomacy and feminist foreign policy, while empirically it underscores Spain's distinctive model in contrast to other European states. In doing so, it contributes to feminist foreign policy literature and offers a valuable reference for understanding how value-based migration diplomacy can reshape Global North–South relations.

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