**6. Troubling French Feminist Diplomacy with the National Context**

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**Abstract**

*Feminist Foreign Policy is increasingly a strategic tool for states to (re)brand themselves as ‘feminist’ actors and norm-setters on the international stage. In the FFP story, states claim the intellectual foundation of feminism and construct themselves as bastions of gender equality. Yet, by imagining feminism and gender equality to be ‘homed’ in these states, FFP obscures real and potential gendered tensions that occur at the domestic level. This chapter illustrates this problem with ‘French feminist diplomacy’, a priority in Macron’s presidency since 2018, and draws on a narrative conceptual framework to trouble the narrative that France is entirely and unequivocally a feminist state. I focus on four domestic issues which reveal France’s internal struggles with gender and feminism: the ‘modèle Républicain’, the democratisation of sexual politics, the racialisation of gender equality, and the rise of (state-sponsored) anti-genderism since the 2000s. By shedding light on a complex politics of gender in the French national context, this chapter constitutes a contribution to postcolonial scholarship on Feminist Foreign Policy, a growing body of literature that challenges the idea that feminism and gender equality belongs to the Global North.*

*Women in France are not pressured to wear specific clothing, because here, in France, women have always been free.*

Nicolas Sarkozy (2016), former French President, Statement at the Conservative party primary before the 2017 elections

*France, for its part, thinking of the legacy of Simone Veil, will continue to defend everywhere, always, sexual and reproductive rights […] Choice is a major right. This is what French feminist diplomacy is about.*

Marlène Schiappa (2018), Former Secretary of State for Gender Equality, Statement at the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) General Debate at the United Nations

**Introduction**

The national landscape of Feminist Foreign Policy and the interplay between the domestic and international contexts of feminist-oriented global frameworks are increasingly of interest to feminist scholars of foreign policy (see for example Haastrup 2020; Jaramillo and Monroy 2021; Aggestam and True 2021; Rosamond and Hedling 2022). A number of states with an FFP have also turned the gaze inward by including gender mainstreaming initiatives in government institutions. Mexico’s feminist foreign policy strategy, for example, includes four internal changes (out of five lines of action) within the Mexican Foreign Ministry to promote FFP, and Spain’s FFP includes three internal measures within the Foreign Service (Thompson, this volume). Likewise, one of the objectives of the French feminist vision of foreign policy, what has been called ‘French feminist diplomacy’, is to promote a stronger institutional culture of gender equality within the French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs, by investigating the internal governance and leadership structure of foreign policy agencies (MEAE 2018). This nascent inward move in foreign policy not only transforms the over-emphasis on the international and systemic level at the heart of foreign policy (Hudson 2005), but it opens up the possibility to challenge the national context of states, who, through championing a feminist approach to foreign policy, have been able to brand themselves as bastions of gender equality and enhanced their reputation through this kind of nation branding (Jezierska and Towns 2018).

Importantly, looking introspectively also speaks to postcolonial scholarship on FFP. This body of work critiques FFP (and liberal feminism more widely) for locating feminism in the Global North and gender inequality in the Global South (see for example Henry 2021; Ansorp et al. 2021; Haastrup 2020; Achilleos-Sarl 2018; Tamang, this volume). As former French President Sarkozy (2016) proclaimed, ‘in France, women have always been free’, and according to Marlène Schiappa (2018), former Secretary of State for Gender Equality, feminism has a long-standing history in Franc. In other words, pro-gender initiatives are imagined as products of the Global North that can and ought to be exported to the Global South. Yet, not only are significant gender and racial inequalities present in those states (see for instance Canada’s colonial era Indian act that discriminates against indigenous women, and Sweden’s immigration laws that disproportionally affect women (Ansorp et al. 2021, 207), but these states often project liberal forms of militarism that are in contradiction to feminist visions of peace (Robinson 2021; Tamang, this volume). This chapter contributes to this growing postcolonial body of literature on FFP by bringing to the fore France’s internal struggles with gender and feminism. Questioning states’ feminist credentials by revealing the silences and omissions in the story states tell about themselves, should be at the core of critically oriented feminist and decolonial strategies when it comes to Feminist Foreign Policy. The objective of this chapter is thus to challenge the narrative that France is a historic, remarkable feminist agent and recalibrate the claim that transformative feminist values are ‘homed’ in France and that gender injustices merely happen beyond French borders. In order to do this, I use a narrative conceptual framework that pays particular attention to how categories are constructed, reproduced, how they circulate, and the political meanings attached to them (Kristalli 2019, p.179). Shepherd (2021, p.17) writes that it is through storytelling practices that pro-gender global frameworks such as the Women, Peace and Security agenda or FFP become knowable ‘things in the world’. Accordingly, I do not treat French feminist diplomacy as ‘real’ in the sense that it exists outside of its narration but consider it as a particular story within a broader narrative that *constitutes* France as a feminist state actor.

The chapter proceeds as follows. The first section situates this chapter in feminist literature in IR and Foreign Policy Analysis, particularly novel arguments that draw on the domestic-foreign policy nexus (Aggestam and True 2021; Jaramillo Ruiz and Monroy 2021; Haastrup 2020). In this section, I also clarify the narrative conceptual framework necessary to apprehend feminist foreign policy. Second, the chapter demonstrates how narrative works in the context of French feminist diplomacy by delineating three identities produced by the dominant story: France is one of the drivers of pro-gender global frameworks such as FFP, France is committed to this agenda, and France is the ‘birthplace of feminism’. In the third section, I focus on four significant aspects of French gender politics that demonstrate France’s uneven and uneasy relationship with gender which trouble the FFP story: the ‘modèle Républicain’, the democratisation of sexual politics, the racialisation of gender equality, and the rise of (state-sponsored) anti-genderism since the 2000s. I conclude that a narrative conceptual framework to examine FFP sheds new light on the tension between domestic politics and the international realm and explains how a plurality of realities about gender in and outside France can co-exist and live alongside each other.

**Feminist perspectives on gender and foreign policy**

*The role of domestic politics in Foreign Policy Analysis*

Foreign policy is often produced at ‘the porous interface of domestic politics and international relations’ (Brighi 2013, p.10), and is a ‘bridge’ between the national and the international (Roseneau 1987, p.1). Explanations of foreign policy decision-making processes with respect to domestic politics have been the source of a rich debate, not least because of IR’s emphasis on the system level of analysis (Fearon 1988; da Conceição-Heldt and Mello 2017). Indeed, in mainstream IR theory such as Neorealism, primacy is often given to the nature of the international structure (anarchy) and to systemic changes in the balance of power as determinants of foreign policy outcomes. State behaviour is explained by law-like generalisations, rather than by the specificities and contingencies of a particular state. In this configuration, a state is considered a ‘black box’ or a coherent unitary actor, meaning that its makeup and the domestic arrangements within the state do not matter in shaping its foreign policy. However, in the 1970s foreign policy scholars established a sub-field of IR, ‘Foreign Policy Analysis’, that recognised the importance of human decision-makers as well as human agency and creativity inside the state in the formulation of foreign policy (Hudson 2005). In so doing, Foreign Policy Analysis addressed the ‘black boxing’ by opening up the state, and by emphasising the role of bureaucracies, political parties, and key policymakers in the decision-making process of foreign policy. Ultimately, this offered a more realistic account of foreign policy.

In 1988, Putnam (1988) was one of the first scholars to show that foreign policy was not the outcome of *either* international and systemic pressures *or* influence from domestic actors, but that foreign policy was rather a ‘two-level game’ between the systemic and domestic realms. He argued that foreign policy was the product of one game operating at the domestic level (Level II) involving domestic groups lobbying the government for adopting particular policies, and another game operating at the international level (Level I), which involves pressure from foreign governments (Putnam 1988, p.434). Further, decision-makers are aware of this two-level game and take it into account prior to and during negotiations (Putnam 1988, 434), and should political leaders ignore any of these two dimensions, they will unsuccessfully bargain with other leaders or/and with ratifying a treaty at home (Bjola and Manor 2018, p.6). Putnam (1988, p.459) offered a substantial model to analyse the reciprocal influence between the domestic and international realms which has since then been used in a plethora of studies, including feminist analyses of pro-gender foreign policy.

*Gendering foreign policy and the levels of analysis typology*

While pro-gender norms and feminist strategies are increasingly salient in foreign policy (Aggestam and True 2020), few gender studies have assessed the role of domestic politics and the national context in the formulation of gender-sensitive foreign policies, and how national politics might present a break from visions of a pro-gender foreign policy (a few exceptions include Jaramillo Ruiz and Monroy (2021); Aggestam and True (2021) and Haastrup (2020)). Feminist IR has also challenged the excessive focus on the international level for explaining the causes of war and violence (Sjoberg 2011). Feminist scholars have pointed out in myriad ways that systemic gender oppression, which is at the heart of Feminist Foreign Policy, should be understood within a continuum of violence from the micro and private level to the macro and international level (Enloe 1990; Moser 2001; Tickner 2001; Cockburn 2017, 2014; True 2012, 2020; Wibben 2020). Whether experienced in the private sphere, at the national level through socioeconomic exclusions, or on the battlefield, gender violence is connected at all levels of analysis.

Yet, one reason that FPA continues to have a ‘gender problem’, which has so far been overlooked in the FFP literature, is that despite the progress made by Foreign Policy Analysis in ‘opening the black box’ and bringing back domestic politics in IR (Hudson 2005), the field of foreign policy is inherently boundary-making (Campbell 1998). In other words, foreign policy treats as *real* the liberal binaries between inside and outside, national and international that are at the heart of the ontology of IR. According to True (2022, p.150-51), not only are these boundaries inseparable from the gender division of space between public and private and the latter’s close association to femininity, the body, emotion and subjectivity, but each level – the individual, the national, the international – excludes women and femininity and goes a long way in institutionalizing masculine hegemony. Thus, for feminist scholars in IR who are concerned with the level of analysis typology, the idea that foreign policy, a field that has been founded on the division of spheres, might be labelled as ‘feminist’ is, troublesome. While this chapter raises this important concern, it also recognizes that we cannot easily do away with this typology, since this would require a whole new language in talking about ‘domestic’ or ‘international’ politics that is outside the scope of this chapter. What this chapter first aims to rectify, is the view that the national realm is irrelevant to international politics and that the state is a unified entity where no political struggles take place. This image is pervasive in mainstream theories of International Relations and foreign policy that view states not only as primary actors in the international sphere but as monolithic and homogenous units (Young 2000, p.47-8). The unitary view of the state is also perpetrated by FFP which project state’s power and identity outwardly as *totally* and *unequivocally* feminist. This identity is constructed through narration and storytelling and it is thus paramount to appraise Feminist Foreign Policy with a narrative conceptual framework.

*Narrative conceptual framework*

We turn to narrative to make sense of the complicated ways in which humans understand and embody their social environment, which do not always cohere around one truth or one way of seeing the world. In other words, narratives provide meanings by organising and ordering complex realities (Wibben 2010). Narratives offer constructions of subjects, objects and selves that through being *storied*, bring them into being. They draw our attention not only on the constitutive effects of language but to seeing narratives as meaning-making practices. Narratives have epistemological and ontological significance in that ‘it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities’ (Somers 1994, p.606). Feminists have long worked with narratives and storytelling to challenge hegemonic discourses. Indeed, as Wibben (2010, p.2) notes, ‘staying attuned to varied everyday experience, through the telling of women’s stories, in this case, is central to feminists’ resistance to abstraction’ and ‘provides a corrective to the generalising and universalising tendencies in traditional science’. However, there are also hegemonic narratives which are crucial to the exercise of power and which constitute forms of violence in themselves (Wibben 2010, p.2).

In the context of Feminist Foreign Policy, a narrative conceptual framework will pay attention to how identities are constructed, the subject positions produced by FFP, as well as the silences and omissions of particular stories within FFP. In concentrating on the constitutive effects of narratives, this chapter examines the ways in which the identity of France is solidified through (re)telling the ‘is’ of French feminist diplomacy, and how a plot of a good story emerges. This story starts with a beginning: feminism was born in France, a middle: France continues to engage with feminist causes through feminist diplomacy, and an end: as the driver of FFP, France has a duty to teach feminism beyond its borders. In seeking to produce this singular identity, French feminist diplomacy forces us toward unity and the view that France is a coherent sphere where little or no dissent occur in regard to gender equality.

This framing of events has consequences for how French feminist diplomacy is imagined and for what is thought of as ‘France’. Stories impose particular ordering while excluding certain interpretations and actors, and thus also impose silences (Wibben 2010, p.2). Highlighting the silences and the contradictions, in turn, becomes an important part of working with narratives (Wibben 2010). Indeed ‘[i]nterpreting silence and absence is as essential a component of feminist narrative approaches as the examination of voice, presence, and speech’ (Kristalli 2019, p.180). It is within this framework that this chapter aims to critically examines French feminist diplomacy. The chapter shows that despite narrating a strong story about France being a feminist actor, different realities about gender in France exist, including a past relationship with feminism and gender that is fractured and more tenuous than the relationship portrayed in the feminist diplomacy story. Furthermore, a narrative approach reminds us that there *is* no singular argument about what French feminist diplomacy is. Following Shepherd (2021, p.17) on the WPS, feminist diplomacy presents a multitude of logics with a ‘plurality that cannot be reconciled, and together they produce and structure the (un)imaginable future(s) of the agenda’. A narrative conceptual framework thus apprehends French feminist diplomacy in other ways than an essential and singular ‘thing in the world’, which importantly opens space for challenging and disrupting the narration of France as a historical feminist agent. Narrating the tensions with gender and feminism in the French national and domestic context can be disruptive as a form of ‘counter-discourse, mode of writing which oppose the terms of power and authority circulated and recirculated in discourse’ (Shapiro 1988, p.19). Indeed, according to Shepherd (2021, 27) ‘[t]elling, or bringing to light, new stories, or juxtaposing existing stories that conflict over or contest salient details, can be a way to deconstruct or challenge those power structures.’ Before turning to France’s internal struggles with gender and feminism at the national level, and rejecting the singularity and linearity of feminist diplomacy that frames France as wholly feminist, the chapter first attends to the ways in which French feminist diplomacy is narrated.

**Narrating French feminist diplomacy**

This section sheds light on three identities constructed by French feminist diplomacy: France is engaged in and committed to a gender-sensitive diplomacy, France is one of the drivers of pro-equality initiatives at the global level, and France is the natural birthplace of feminism. First, French feminist diplomacy is narrated as a central force behind France’s diplomatic and external action. French President Emmanuel Macron (2018) declared ‘equality between the sexes’ one of his priorities and attributed fifty percent of international aid to the reduction of gender inequalities around the world. Thus, in 2018, and in line with other ‘good citizen’ states, France announced a ‘French feminist diplomacy’ and rolled out the ‘International Strategy for Equality Between Men and Women 2018-2022’ (Ministère de l'Europe et des Affaires Étrangères 2018). This strategy outlines five ‘sectorial priorities’, including, to ‘ensure free and equal access to services, especially basic social services such as education and sexual and reproductive health’; second, to ‘promote access to - and monitoring of - productive and economic resources, and access to decent work’; third, to ‘guarantee women and girls’ free and equal access to rights and justice as well as their protection against all forms of violence; fourth to ‘ensure meaningful participation of women in economic, political and social decision-making forums’ and finally to ‘ensure equal participation of women in peace and security processes’ (French Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs 2018).

The fact that France is allocating a budget of 120 million euros to support feminist movements, NGOs and programmes, 97 million euros to reproductive health, 320 million euros to tackle gender inequalities in the Global South (MEAE 2020), that the President has established a monitoring system of the commitments made as part of French feminist diplomacy (Le Drian and Schiappa 2019), and that French feminist diplomacy has a dedicated tab on the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs’ website, are all indications that French actions in foreign policy show that France is ‘devoted to gender equality’ (Schiappa 2018) and that its diplomacy ‘serves the goal of achieving gender equality’ (Macron 2019). A commitment to gender and feminism is also noted in the preference for the term feminist *diplomacy* rather than feminist *foreign policy*, more commonly used by other states. In France, ‘foreign policy’ is seen as the preserve of the French president (Grésy et al. 2020, p.25) whereas ‘diplomacy’ calls into action the whole of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs and its associated agencies. Thus, the rationale for prioritising ‘diplomacy’ over ‘foreign policy’ might be to signal that while gender equality is President Macron’s priority, promoting gender equality at the international level involves several bureaucracies, steering groups, committees and in the end, that a significant number of people are involved in the design and implementation of the strategy.

Second, France is narrated as one of the ‘drivers’ of an international feminist initiative. Even if France is by far not the first state in the Global North to orient its foreign policy towards gender equality, French officials often refer to France as the first member of the UN Security Council to formally adopt a feminist foreign policy and the first to have set a monitoring system to track its progress (Pallopothu 2020). Through driving Feminist Foreign Policy, France’s agency is reaffirmed on the international stage. France’s actions are ‘powerful’ (Le Drian and Schiappa 2019) and pro-active, by adopting new laws to achieve gender equality, devoting 50% of its development budget to projects aiming to reducing gender inequalities. Emmanuel Macron (2018) lobbied the United Nations at the 73rd session of the General Assembly to follow suit, by asking delegates to make gender parity a ‘great cause’ for them too. This move aimed to position France as the architect and engineer of feminist foreign policy to the world. Lastly, with the government of Mexico, France co-hosted the Generation Equality Forum in June 2021, the largest gathering of civil society actors for women’s rights since the 1995 UN Beijing conference, a ‘historic global feminist event’ (MEAE 2022). This signals that France is consulting local, national and international civil society actors, engages in a dialogue and opens up access and participation with state policymaking when it concerns gender rights.

Third, declarations and documents about French feminist diplomacy often narrate feminism and women’s rights as integral to the very fabric of the nation, as naturally ‘homed’ and protected in France. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Gender Equality (Schiappa 2018) stated at the United Nation’s 62nd session of the Commission of the Status of Women, that France is ‘the country of Simone de Beauvoir’. To position France as the ‘birthplace of philosophical feminism’ (Schiappa in Wulfhorst 2018) constitutes a claim to the intellectual foundations of feminism, its origins, its celebrated figures and its future. France’s relationship with feminism and gender equality is constructed as organic, historical, and as such, it is not only natural but necessary for France to disseminate its expertise beyond its frontiers. Feminist foreign policy is here harboured by a larger narrative that locates feminism as that which France (and the Global North more generally) gives to the Global South. According to Sara Ahmed (2017, p.4) ‘that assumption is a travelling assumption, one that tells a feminist story in a certain way, a story that is much repeated; a history of how feminism acquired utility as an imperial gift’. This is evident when considering who are the recipients of French feminist diplomacy, which primarily targets France’s ex colonies in Africa, and when the principal threats to women’s rights are identified by the former State for as ‘obscurantism’ (Schiappa 2018), or ‘reactionary ideologies and extremism, particularly of a religious nature’ (Serment de Paris in MAEA 2018).

As the next section will hopefully make clear, the promotion and advancement of gender equality in France is informed by a universal, liberal and racialised form of feminism which has tended to consider *all* women the same, whilst simultaneously using feminism to stigmatise Muslim men and women. In addition, France has historically wrestled with the concept and nomenclature ‘gender’ and has tended to use the term ‘equality between men and women’. This maintains men and women as biologically distinct, and effaces the symbolic, cultural and importantly constructed nature that ‘gender’ carries. The following and last section sheds light on a fractured and fragile relationship with gender and more intersectional form of feminisms, which complicates the reading of France as naturally and unequivocally feminist as narrated in the French feminist diplomacy story.

**France’s internal struggles with gender and feminism**

This section unravels France’s complex relationship with feminism and gender by focusing on four significant areas of French domestic politics: the Republican model, the democratisation of sexual politics, the racialisation of sexual politics, and the growth of state-sponsored anti-genderism since the 2000s. In so doing, I bring to light the omissions and erasures within the official French feminist diplomacy story and demonstrate instead that a pluralities of realities about French identity and history with gender and feminism exist.

*The ‘modèle Républicain’ and universalism in France*

The Republican model is a deeply entrenched model of citizenship and nationality, historically espoused by the right and the left in France. It is rooted inthe 1789 French Revolution that removed sovereignty from the monarch and proclaimed equality of citizens before the law (Hargreaves1995: 160). Since then, the French state has emphasized the acquisitionof French citizenship and the adoption of French identity (naturalization) as the crucialstep to attaining equality within the nation (Bleich 2000, p.52). The model stipulates that citizens of the French Republic must first and foremost identify as French citizens, which means that the nation-state is the chief site of citizenship and national identity transcends particular and ‘private’ preferences (Laborde 2008, p.3).

What departs from the Republican model is a strong belief against, and a fear of, a multicultural society and communitarianism, or what has now been referred as ‘separatism’ in Macron’s presidency. The common rationale for the French Republican model of citizenship is that recognising identarian demands ‘would fracture the Republican community and create discord within the nation itself’ (Montague 2013, p.220). In effect, for leading Republican figures, communitarianism opens the door for sub-societies and potential clashes between different ethnic groups, and between those groups and the majority national community. Republican discourse has traditionally translated into colour and gender-blindness where issues of race and gender are relegated to the ‘private’ sphere, which has been effective in minimising minority political agency and invalidating discussion about gender-based and especially race-based structural and institutional inequalities in France (Montague 2013). According to Berger (2016, p.2), ‘the widely shared distrust across the political spectrum toward any initiative—political, intellectual, or institutional—that appears to question the abstract unity of the Republic and the ideal of (French) universalism has meant that any attempt, academic or otherwise, to emphasize the predicament of specific groups or segments of society, be they women, sexual minorities, or so-called ethnic minorities, was met with hostility’.

Historically, the rejection of the language of race through the Republican model was thought to be an appropriate response to the spread of Nazism in Europe in the 1930s. Indeed universalism and a unified identity centred around the nation constituted a discourse and ideology that stood up against a racist discourse about race propagating before the Second World War. In the 1980s, the Republican discourse was revitalised to replace a declining Marxist vision of society on the one hand, and to fight against the flagrant return of racism manifested through the success of the Front National (FN), on the other hand (Garner and Fassin 2013, p.1471). According to Garner and Fassin (2013, p.1471), the 1989 headscarf controversy, which lead to the banning of headscarves in public schools, was a turning point. It crystalised the Republican and liberal binaries of private/public by reaffirming the ‘rightful’ place of religion (in particular Islam) in the private sphere (Garner and Fassin 2013, p.1471). Just as race was becoming a defining issue within French society with the headscarf affair, speaking about race became again unthinkable and unspeakable (Garner and Fassin 2013, p.1472). Despite the French state claiming not to see race and gender, the affair clearly demonstrated that race and gender were at work. Indeed, the ‘colour-blind’ model is a lure: while it promises not to discriminate because it makes no distinction between people, it obscures cultural and racial inequity and domination (Larzillière and Sal 2011; Garner and Fassin 2013, p.1471).

*The democratisation of sexual politics and the nationalisation of gender*

In the early 2000s, the Republican motto was reinvented by including questions about sex and gender and elevating those issues to the public sphere. Fassin (2006, p.125-6) coined the term ‘sexual democracy’, or the democratisation of sexual politics, to characterise this process, which refers primarily to two processes. First, ‘sexual democracy’ refers to the period of time when gender equality reached public and political status in France and when the democratic and public domain expanded to include questions about sex, sexuality and gender, which were previously thought as intimate and domestic matters (Fassin 2008, p.48). In a sexual democracy, sex and gender acquire a political character in public discourse in the same way as education, healthcare, and taxation (Fassin 2006, p.125-6). Second, sexual democracy relates to the process whereby sex, gender and sexuality stop being ‘natural’ and immutable questions, and instead become open to questioning, construction and reconstruction. In a sexual democracy, gendersex differences are viewed as social conventions, learnt through a process of socialisation and performed iteratively, by a sustained series of speech acts (Butler 1989). In other words, the term sexual democracy also marks the end of the natural sciences having sole authority over defining and essentialising male and female characteristics. Fassin argues that in the early 2000s, France democratised sexual politics by openly speaking about gender issues in public, which generated a new sexual climate.

This climate was relatively new to France. Despite a strong heritage of writers involved in de-naturalising and ‘undoing’ sex since the 1950s, beginning with Simone de Beauvoir’s (1949) *The Second Sex*, the concept of gender disappeared in the late 1980s and 1990s (Fassin 2008; Berger 2016). In the 1970s, a productive transatlantic dialogue between U.S. and French academics in the Social Sciences and Humanities developed and was a generative force in the institutionalisation of the concept of ‘gender’ in the US (including the establishment of ‘gender studies’ as a separate academic field of study). But at the beginning of the 1980s, gender became contentious in France. Indeed, academics became cautious in using the concept of gender (Fassin 2008, Berger 2016), and the term became pronounced in English, ‘gender’, rather than its translated version, ‘genre’, so as to not misconstrue its origins (Fassin 2011, p.145). This coincided with the reaffirmation of the Republican model in the 1980s discussed earlier, which precluded any discussion on issues of race and gender. ‘Gender’ was perceived as too militant and at the centre of the identity/communitarian politics that ‘plagued’ the United States. Talking about gender in France was associated to the Americanisation of French culture (Fassin 2008, p.386), and became rooted in a politicised and sensationalised debate about so-called ‘political correctness’ and ‘culture wars’ that accompanied the flourishing of gender studies in the U.S.

Fortunately for gender scholars and practitioners, questions about sex and gender made a comeback in the late 1990s (Berger 2016). They (re)appeared at the forefront of the debate around civil partnerships ‘PaCS’ (Pacte civil de solidarité), a law to ensure legal status for same-sex couples adopted in 1999, and around the law on gender parity adopted in 2000, securing equal participation of men and women in politics (Fassin 2006; Garner and Fassin 2013, p.1473). These watershed moments signalled the nationalisation of gender, that is, when gender came out of its private sphere and transformed into a political and national issue. One of the reasons for the shift in the Republican model and the ‘coming out’ of gender at the beginning of the 2000s, was financial and commercial. Indeed, until the beginning of the 1980s, France had been leading in ‘French thought’ (most notably postmodernist work by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) and exporting this current overseas. But as ‘many among the most important representatives of this intellectual stream died and the intellectual effervescence of the sixties slowly dwindled, France ceased to be the main exporter of ideas worldwide’ (Berger 2016, p.3-4). According to Berger (2016, p.3), by the early 2000s knowledge exchange between the US and France had reversed: the US was now the leading conveyer of ideas, especially in the financially profitable undergraduate and postgraduate Gender Studies degrees. In the race for marketable degrees and in the context of the neoliberalisation of higher education in the 2000s, the reintroduction of ‘gender’ in French higher education became a necessity.

*The racialisation of sexual politics and femonationalism*

The re-appearance of the concept of gender coincided with the racialisation of gender equality agendas in France (Fassin 2008; 2009). A number of race, gender, and queer scholars (see for instance Fassin 2006, 2008, 2012; Fekete 2006; Puar 2007; Farris 2017; Webber 2016; Mondon and Winter 2017) have paid attention to the ways in which women’s rights have been exploited to condemn racialised Others. This body of literature explores how gender equality has been instrumentalised ‘to draw a line between “us” and “them” (Muslims, immigrants, etc.)’ (Garner 2013, p.1466) and the ways in which feminism is put in the service of civilisational politics. For these authors, feminist concerns over the wellbeing of women and (some) queer minorities are being harnessed to further racialise people of colour, in particular Brown men who are portrayed as oppressive and polygamous, and Brown women who are victims of Brown men and who, as a result, must emancipate from their husbands, fathers and brothers. Sara Farris (2017, p.4) calls the convergence between nationalist politics and feminism – a phenomenon which distinguishes current European nationalist parties from their older counterparts – ‘femonationalism’. This concept attends to the exploitation of feminist values by a coalition of right-wing nationalists, some feminists and femocrats, in disparaging Muslim men in the name of women’s rights. Because of its supposedly patriarchal customs, opposition to homosexuality and women’s rights, some feminists and gay activists denounced Islam as an alien religion and culture that threaten ‘Western’ values (Fekete 2006, p.2).

Femonationalism is particularly prominent in France in which a productive alliance between extreme right-wing groups such as the Front National, representatives of gender-equality state-funded agencies (femocrats), and women’s associations, has crystalised since the beginning of the new Century. The mobilisation of women’s rights has also been a strategy to mainstream radical and extreme political parties such as the National Front. Previously thought of as an overtly myogenic, racist, and antisemitic party under its former leader Jean-Marie Le Pen, the National Front underwent a transformation under Marine Le Pen’s leadership in the 2010s wherein gender equality held a key position (Farris 2017, p. 33). Indeed, the rhetoric turn of the National Front initiated by Marine Le Pen invoked pseudo-feminist claims of women’s emancipation and freedom to legitimate anti-immigration politics (Larzillière and Sal 2011; Scrinzi 2017, p.132). Gender equality de-demonised the party as its image and identity became branded as a ‘new’ kinder, gentler French National Front. In this historical juncture and convergence, a generic and conformist feminism has emerged and has been adopted by the mainstream (Farris 2017). Yet, it is important to note that this new rhetoric has real consequences in the world since immigrant’s rights to citizenship depend on accepting equality between the sexes in the ‘Republican pact’ (Garner and Fassin 2013, p.1480).

*Rising anti-genderism in France*

The first discernible manifestation of state-sponsored anti-genderism in France can be traced back to 2005 (coincidentally also the year Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* was translated in French), when a powerful branch of the Académie Française, in charge of studying and determining whether certain expressions enrich the French language, declared the term ‘equality between the sexes’ or ‘equality between men and women’ to be more appropriate than the expression ‘gender equality’. The State Committee on Terminology and Neologism (2005) noted that the definition of gender was too broad, encompassed too many notions related to sex, and the term was ‘excessively’ deployed in the Social Sciences and by the media. According to the Committee (2005), the word ‘sex’ and its derivatives ‘sexist’ and ‘sexual’, were well adapted to speak about differences between women and men, including their cultural, social and economic dimensions. Substituting the term ‘equality between the sexes’ with ‘gender equality’, the Committee concluded (2005), was therefore not justified in the French language, and public administrations were disadvised to use this term.

‘Equality between the sexes’ does not do away with the essentialist notion that women and men are biologically distinct or that gendered behaviours emanate from biological sex. In contrast to this essentialist approach, a gender perspective views sex and gender as a product of a cultural apparatus and as ‘real only to the extent that is performed’ (Butler, 1988, 529). ‘Sex’ and its derivatives fail to address the constructed, socialised and performative nature of gender and do not treat the division of men and women as problematic empirical categories and as effects of ‘specific formations of power’ ([1990]1999, xxix). A more radical account of sexandgender would instead treat the sexed body as a product of powerful representations and discourses, which would require a re-focus and a shift in our thinking from one about the ‘doer before the deed’, toward the kind of subject positions that are constituted and the kind of actions that are legitimised as a result of a discourse about sex differences (Hansen 2013, 21-22). Initiatives toward achieving equality between the sexes, including those proposed in French feminist diplomacy, will thus aim to rectify economic and social imbalances between men and women, for example by redressing the gender pay gap, increasing the participation of women in leadership and decision-making processes, or improving access to reproductive health for women. Some initiatives might speak to the ‘inner truths’ of being a woman, for instance the idea that women are more peaceful, which runs through the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and thus re-essentialise women in the process.

A second controversy erupted when some of the insights of ‘gender theory’ featured in a biology textbook for College Students taking the Literature or Economic and Social Studies pathways. At the heart of the scandal was a new chapter called ‘femininity-masculinity’ in which students were asked to reflect on the distinctions between biological sex, sexual orientations and gender identities, and to think about what it meant to be a woman or a man in sociological and cultural terms. Pressured from various conservative civil society groups, the issue reached Parliament and in a couple of months, a hundred and thirteen senators asked the Minister of Education Luc Chatel for the withdrawal of the textbook and any mention of gender theory in the biology curriculum (Béraud 2013).

The biology textbook incident is not unique. Schools and education are crucial sites for anti-gender movements, as anti-gender forces believe that children are being sexualised and indoctrinated by ‘gender theory’ (Kuar and Zobec 2017, p.29). In France, various measures in Schools and Higher Education have been strongly opposed by ‘concerned parents’ who petition the State and call on their respective Member of Parliament to stop pro-gender initiatives. Indeed, the creation of the Research and Teaching Programme on gender (PRESAGE) at Sciences Po, the introduction of same-sex couple rights in a module on ‘Rights and major issues in the contemporary world’, and the presentation of a short animation called ‘Moon kiss’ on a same-sex love relationship to pupils in primary school, have all sparked intense national debates about the “threat of gender” (Béraud 2013). Furthermore, in 2016 the President of the Regional Council of Paris-Ile-de France, Valerie Pécresse, terminated scholarships for students in Gender Studies and defunded various gender programmes, despite vowing to fight against sexual harassments and sexual violence as a candidate of the 2021 French Presidential elections (Martin 2016; Abboud and White 2022). This episode demonstrates that an agenda sensitive to women’s rights can coincide with a strong opposition to the concept of gender and what it entails.

Anti-genderism reached its peak during the 2013-14 demonstrations against the Taubira Law that legalised same-sex marriage. The campaign ‘Manif Pour Tous’ (Protest For Everyone), successfully organised hundreds of thousands of people in the streets and has impacted policymaking in various ways (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018, p.8). The Catholic Church was at the forefront of these protests and worked side by side with Conservative Republican actors to oppose the ‘ideology of gender’, contravening the secular and ‘non-biased’ logic of the French state when it comes to religion. Indeed, during the “Printemps Francais” (French Spring), the wider movement against same-sex marriage that vigorously mobilised during the Spring of 2013, the French Catholic Church effectively ‘came out of its secular closet’, as Fassin (2020, p.79) notes.

To sum up, while the official story of French feminist diplomacy assumes that France’s relationship with gender and feminism is natural, historical and simple, this short history has shown instead that issues concerning gender and women’s rights have instead first been relegated to the private sphere because of the Republican model’s aversion to questions of identity, and second, because the concept of gender has stayed in the margins, being perceived as too militant and controversial. Third, gender and feminism entered the national and public stage in the early 2000s, and this move is attributed to the commercialisation of research degrees on gender and to the convergence of nationalist politics with LGBTQIA+ rights that mainstreamed gender equality. Moreover, recent anti-gender attacks show that despite gender being popular and appropriated in French official documents and strategies like French feminist diplomacy, the story of gender in France is fragile. As Fassin (2011, 148) rightly points out, in France, ‘gender (still) does trouble’. FFP scholars have rightly interrogated the use of the term ‘feminist’ in Foreign Policy (Jezierska and Towns 2018; Thomson 2020; Robinson 2021). The case of France indicates that a tamed, essentialist and importantly racialised form of feminism pervades the national context, which may in turn, shape French feminist diplomacy.

**Conclusions: Troubling French feminist diplomacy**

Treating French feminist diplomacy as a particular story within a larger narrative that produces France as a feminist actor, and thus not as ‘real’ in the sense of existing outside of its narration, illuminates the tension between a complex and fragile national context with the politics of gender, and a foreign policy realm that presents a linear and uniform view of France as a feminist state. As narratives privilege one particular interpretation over others, they can close and silence alternative perspectives and voices. In this case, France’s fractured and fragile history with gender and feminism, notably the disappearance of the concept of gender from the 1980s to the early 2000s, the revocation of the term ‘gender’ by the Académie Française and the racialised underpinnings of gender equality, have been omitted from the narration that France is essentially and entirely a feminist state. Adopting a narrative approach thus forces us to look at these alternative histories and, in the end, and bring them to light as a form of counter-discourse. As Kristally (2019, p.180) notes, ‘[i]nterpreting silence and absence is as essential a component of feminist narrative approaches as the examination of voice, presence, and speech’.

Second, a closer examination on the meaning and use of the term ‘gender’ and ‘feminism’ is required within the narrative that France is a feminist state. Narratives seek to fix which meanings are possible (meaningful, rational) and which are not (irrational, meaningless) (Wibben 2010, p.43). Thus, the narrative that frames France as the natural home to feminism is not free or unbounded and what ‘feminism’ looks like has a specific meaning that is pre-established by the narrative. For example, when the term ‘gender equality’ is invoked by French officials, the meaningful, rational and reasoned understanding of this term is around material, and socio-economic differences between men and women, and an essentialist interpretation of men and women as biologically distinct. What is irrational or simply beyond common-sense, is to think of ‘gender’ as anything other than an inner truth of the female and male body or as anything but ‘common sense’ (which is the name of the anti-gender movement within the Republican party in France). To import the term gender from the US or the UK, as a performative act, is ‘excessive’ and ‘unjustified’ according to the Académie Française (State Committee on Terminology and Neologism 2005). Furthermore, in this narrative, a reasonable understanding of ‘women’s freedom’ concerns women’s economic empowerment, access to reproductive health, and importantly, it is also equated to the absence of religious clothing such as the veil or the hijab. This culturalist and civilisational definition of political agency permeates the imagined figure of the ‘free woman’ in France insofar as this emancipated figure is reduced to women who have refused to wear religious clothing. Similar civilisational assumptions about political agency and victimhood run through programmes set up by international organisations in transitional justice in post-revolutionary Tunisia, according to Kebaili (this volume).

This is an important conclusion in a context where gender equality agendas can be harnessed to justify liberal forms of Islamophobia and racist national policies. This is at the heart of President Macron’s new ‘anti-separatist’ bill passed in 2021 by the National Assembly, which aims to bolster the ‘modèle Républicain’ (French Interior Ministry 2022, p.7). While the universal Republican model was historically gender and colour-blind, the anti-separatist bill now exploits gender to denounce what the state describes as ‘practices opposed to the Republican values of equality between men and women’ (this includes polygamy, forced marriages, certificates of virginity) (French Interior Ministry 2022, p.7). The bill also targets further and higher education institutions by policing academic freedom and seeking to neutralise what has been referred as ‘Islamo-gauchisme’ (Islamo-Leftism), schools of thought in the Social Sciences that recognise race as a category (Geisser 2021, p.12). According to a letter signed by a hundred influential (right-wing) academics and public intellectuals in *Le Monde*, indigenous and decolonial ideologies promote Anglo-Saxon forms of communitarianism, feed ‘anti-white hatred’ and are, in continuing with their line of reasoning, responsible for the growth of jihadism.

I situated this chapter in the growing Turn to ‘gender’ foreign policy, in particular the move to open the ‘black box’ and examine how domestic politics interact with foreign policy when it comes to gender. As Jaramillo and Monroy (2021, p.421), this chapter demonstrated that the ‘directionality of international and domestic pressures is less straightforward and more complex than might be assumed’. France’s internal struggles with gender and feminism might inform and permeate French feminist diplomacy and thus shape the foreign policy agenda outwardly. But the political purchase of this strategy is as great for the international as well as domestic audiences for it reinforces national identity and take attention away from the domestic shortcomings and political struggles that occur within the state. As Chandler (2003, p.295) posits in relation to an ethically-oriented foreign policy, this kind of foreign policy can ‘buttress the moral authority of governments, often under question in the domestic context’. In addition, by revealing a more complex relation with gender and feminism at the domestic level, this chapter sought to amplify postcolonial and decolonial voices that rightly critique FFP for imagining the Global South as a site of feminist intervention and the Global North as the ‘owner’ of the intellectual foundation of feminism.

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