

BETWEEN FEMINISM AND REALPOLITIK- GERMANY UNDER ANGELA MERKELV Karunasena¹ and H Wijesinghe²**Abstract**

Men have traditionally dominated international relations, and the modern international political landscape frequently reflects male-dominated structures in concepts such as state sovereignty, power politics, and militarization. Thus, this paper examines whether female leaders have a natural tendency to diplomacy, peace orientation, inclusivity, and cooperation- key concepts in feminist theory, or whether their policies and decisions are strongly influenced by the strategic demands and conventional geopolitical paradigm, regardless of their gender. The study is based on qualitative and secondary data from publications, academic articles, reports, journal articles, books, and media sources. Looking at world history, numerous female leaders have led their countries, holding different positions. This study looks at Germany under Angela Merkel- the first Chancellor of Germany. Following a descriptive analysis of the collected data, the research question is addressed through the theory of liberal feminism. The research evaluated Merkel's significant contribution to promoting gender equality within Germany, including legislative reforms and female participation in politics and the workforce. On the international stage, four major case studies- Merkel's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2015 refugee crisis, the Ukraine-Russian relations, and Brexit were analysed to determine the extent to which her policy decisions embody feminist principles. The finding reveals a nuanced leadership style. While Merkel's domestic agenda aligns with liberal feminist ideals, her foreign policy reflects a pragmatic fusion of both feminism and realpolitik considerations within the changing global power dynamics. Overall, it emphasizes that Merkel's legacy cannot be determined solely through a feminist lens; rather, it embodies a complex reciprocation between feminist ideals and realpolitik. Ultimately, the study underscores the evolving nature of women in international leadership and highlights how female leaders can reshape but not completely deviate from conventional paradigms of power politics.

Keywords: Angela Merkel, Foreign Policy, Gender Equality, Liberal feminism, Realpolitik

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Introduction

Feminism refers to a set of sociopolitical movements and ideologies that seek to define and establish gender equality in politics, economics, personal relationships, and society. It asserts that modern societies are patriarchal, prioritizing the male point of view, and that women are mistreated in these societies. In recent years, a growing number of states, including Canada, Norway, Germany, and Sweden, have implemented gender and feminist-informed foreign and security policies. These policies aim to promote the greater inclusion of women in decision-making processes.

Angela Merkel, Germany's first female chancellor, served from 2005 to 2021, leading the country through significant obstacles and challenges. The decade of 2021 marks the completion of the 'Merkel' era in German politics. The four-term chancellor left the office after successfully navigating Germany's international and domestic challenges, earning Forbes's title of most powerful woman worldwide on several occasions. From 2005 to 2021, the Merkel era was marked by international crises which included the Great Recession, the Greek debt crisis, the 2010 Arab Spring, the 2011 Fukushima nuclear disaster, the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, the 2015 so-called migration crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of populism and nationalism in advanced democracies. Terrorist attacks in Europe and worldwide necessitated innovative domestic and foreign policy responses (Ahrens et al., 2021). Merkel's leadership was often described as pragmatic and cautious yet decisive (Timoshenkova, 2022). As a female leader, her approach and leadership style have sparked debate over the role of gender in the political arena.

Historically, men have dominated the field of international relations, with a disproportionate number of men serving as notable names and professors compared to women (Byronm & Thorburn, 1998). One could argue that the current system of masculine dominance is inherent in state sovereignty. The state is unique in its definition of holding a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, and this fact alone defines the nature of leadership as violent and expressed through a hierarchical structure, characteristics traditionally associated with men (Hoffman, 2001). As a result, the inclusion of women in positions of power would have a significant impact on the state system. The competitive international state system would continue to exert significant influence over the actions of those who engage with it, whether male or female. Feminist theorists have long argued that women in leadership tend to embrace more collaborative, peace-oriented approaches than their male counterparts. Youngs (2004) pointed out that Women have been largely absent from mainstream International Relations, so it has been critical to develop growing bodies of theoretical and substantive research regarding them.

On the other hand, Ferree (2022) argues that Women continue to be under-represented in national leadership positions. The notion that the world would be more peaceful if women held key power positions is centred on the traditional view of females as less aggressive and, conversely, more peaceful and conciliatory. Some may question whether these values are biologically ingrained or societally imposed norms (Cook & Wilcox, 1991). Subsequently, Pinker (2011) draws parallels between countries that do not empower women and those that have the highest levels of conflict and violence. This relationship is further supported by the discovery of a strong link between the world's most peaceful countries and those with the highest levels of sexual equality. Although this is a tenuous link and not directly causal, it does imply that the relationship between gender and war is extremely complex. Therefore, Merkel's tenure offers a unique case study for exploring feminist perspectives in political leadership, and thereby, many Scholars have examined her rise to power through a gender lens.

This research is significant because Merkel's long-term leadership challenged many traditional views of female leadership. Chancellor Merkel's government faces significant domestic and international political changes. However, the study primarily focuses on four significant incidents that define Angela Merkel's leadership, including the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit, the migration crisis, and handling Ukraine-Russia relations. These incidents not only raise questions about whether gender plays a significant role in the decision-making process but also provide insights into her leadership style during crucial and pivotal moments in the European and global political landscape. Furthermore, Merkel's influence on domestic policies, particularly in terms of promoting gender equality, is another area that requires deep exploration. Merkel's positive recognition of her role as a female pioneer marks an interesting shift in gender politics. She is a female politician who rose rapidly through the ranks of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), a party with a non-feminist agenda and a lower proportion of female members and representatives (Ferree, 2022). It will assess her significant contribution to promoting gender equality in Germany, providing a broader understanding of the intersection between gender, leadership, and policy formation.

Angela Merkel has done more for gender equality in Germany than any previous chancellor, despite her refusal to call herself a feminist (Mushaben, 2009). The main aim of the research is, therefore, to critically assess Angela Merkel's leadership role from the feminist perspective and analyze her foreign and domestic policies to determine

whether her leadership approaches align with feminist principles and whether the role of gender influences the key decision-making processes.

Methodology

The primary objectives of this study were to determine the key elements of the feminist approach to international relations, evaluate Angela Merkel's leadership's impact on German foreign policy, and assess her contributions to the advancement of gender equality in Germany. A qualitative research approach served as the foundation for the study in order to achieve these goals. Every resource used in the study was obtained from secondary data sources, such as books, scholarly articles, official reports, journal entries, and academic publications, which offered a variety of viewpoints. Additionally, to provide a real-time dimension and to capture current diplomatic discourse pertinent to Angela Merkel's leadership, media content such as news articles and social media platforms were integrated. The data gathered through the secondary sources were analyzed using descriptive analysis, which was instrumental in categorizing and interpreting the vast array of information obtained from diverse sources. Furthermore, the research question was addressed through the theoretical lens of liberal feminism. By focusing on both Angela Merkel's domestic and foreign policies, the study explored whether her leadership approaches aligned with feminist principles and whether the role of gender influenced key decision-making processes and their global implications.

Results and Discussion

Angela Merkel's journey to becoming Germany's first female chancellor is remarkable. Born on 1954 July 17, in Hamburg, West Germany, Merkel moved to East Germany when her father accepted a pastorate in Quitzow, Brandenburg (Marr, 2013). However, the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 paved the path to enter politics, marking the beginning of her influential career both within Germany and on the international stage.

Reaching a milestone in her political career Merkel was elected to the Bundestag (lower house of parliament) in the first post-reunification election, held in December 1990, representing Stralsund-Rügen-Grimmen. Recognizing her potential, Chancellor Helmut Kohl appointed her as Minister for Women and Youth in January 1991. Kohl's selection of a young female political newcomer from East Germany appealed to a variety of demographics, earning Merkel the nickname "Kohls Mädchen" ("Kohl's girl"). Following accusations of working for the Stasi, Maizière, who had become the CDU's deputy chairman after the eastern and western parties merged, resigned on September 6, 1991. Merkel was elected to replace him. Following the 1994 election, Merkel was appointed Minister of Environment, Conservation, and Reactor Safety, and she presided over the first United Nations Climate Conference in Berlin in March and April 1995. In September 1998, Gerhard Schröder and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) ousted the CDU. Merkel was elected as the CDU's secretary-general on November 7.

Merkel took office as chancellor on November 22, 2005, becoming the first woman, the first East German, and, at 51, the youngest person to do so. When she stepped down in 2021, she was Germany's second-longest-serving leader of the modern era, trailing only her former mentor, Helmut Kohl. Since her election in 2005, she has transformed German politics. Her accomplishments at home and abroad have placed her on Forbes' most powerful women list eight times. Her mere presence as a Protestant, East German woman at the helm of the Christian Democratic Union, a male-dominated, largely Catholic party with roots in West Germany, has impacted not only the party but, arguably, German society. She famously outpaced many men on her way to power. Merkel's assistance in transforming the deeply traditional party into "one of the pillars of the new German consensus" has resulted in a new policy direction on everything (Connolly, 2017).

Merkel's rise to power itself was groundbreaking in a country historically dominated by male political figures. Historically, CDU has struggled with gender representation and was resistant to quota implementation. Compared to the social democratic party (SPD) and the Greens, which implemented strict gender quotas, the CDU adopted a softer approach in 1996 by introducing the quorum, which aimed to allocate at least 33% of party positions and candidate lists to women. However, the expected provisions were largely ignored in implementation. The party's inner opposition to gender quotas was largely influenced by the ideological framework, which has traditionally supported conservative values, including a preference for the male breadwinner model (Ahrens & Lang, 2021).

First, Merkel was opposed to gender quotas and frequently expressed her indifference. However, over time, she acknowledged that she benefitted from gender quotas and eventually endorsed them. The article "Angela Merkel and the CDU Quota Curse" by Ahrens and Lang (2021) identifies three major factors that influenced and shaped the CDU's shift from an anti-quota position to accepting stronger intervention for gender equality. First, Merkel pushed her party away from its traditional conservative attitude on gender roles such as the male-breadwinner model. Second, the CDU faced dwindling party membership and a loss of female voters, and Merkel realized that the strong opposition to quotas would jeopardize the party's electoral prospects and its modernization efforts. The

SPD, which had more progressive gender policies, also pushed her to support quotas. Third, Women in the CDU, particularly the Women's Union, gradually gained more influence in shaping party policies. Other powerful CDU women, such as Ursula von der Leyen and Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, contributed to the legitimacy of the quota debate. Merkel allowed these inner-party gender activists to advocate for increased female representation.

As far as her domestic achievements are concerned, in 2007, Germany introduced Parental leave reforms that aimed to strengthen shared responsibilities and make it easier for mothers to continue working and for fathers to spend time with their newborn babies. The newly introduced reforms changed the old parental leave benefit scheme in many ways. It replaced a means-tested benefit aimed at low-income families with an earnings-based transfer that is available to all families. While the duration of job protection (36 months) remains unchanged, the maximum period of paid leave has been reduced from 24 to 12 months. Depending on household income and individual pre-birth earnings, this altered work incentives for mothers in the first and second years after childbirth. Mothers with high pre-birth earnings now have strong incentives to take one-year leave. Incentives for mothers with low pre-birth earnings and household income to return to work in the second year after giving birth have increased (Frodermann et al., 2022). Further, the new parental leave scheme included a "daddy quota" of two months. This means that each parent is assigned two of the 14 months. If one (non-single) parent does not take parental leave, the family's paid parental leave can last up to twelve months (Geisler et al., 2012).

Women's under-representation in German boardrooms had always been an issue for several years. However, the Merkel government has signed off on a new bill to boost the number of female executives in the country's corporate boardrooms. According to the AllBright Foundation, which advocates for boardroom diversity, women represent just 12.8% of management board members at Germany's 30 largest listed companies, which are included in Frankfurt's blue-chip DAX index. In contrast, women occupy 28.6% of senior positions in the US, 24.5% in the UK, and 22.2% in France, illustrating that Germany is lagging behind. The 2015 law that guarantees a 30% quota for women on German supervisory boards will be expanded upon by the agreement. According to Justice Minister Christine Lambrecht, the law sends "a very strong signal," encouraging businesses to "take advantage of the opportunity presented by highly qualified women" (Welle, 2021).

Furthermore, in 2017, Germany introduced the Pay Transparency Act to achieve pay parity between men and women who perform equivalent or identical work. If a company regularly employs more than 200 people, the new Act enables individual employees to request information about pay structures and the compensation of other employees within a comparison group. Reports on efforts to advance gender equality must be produced regularly by companies with more than 500 employees. However, the Works Council (Betriebsrat) must take the required steps to shield employees from sex-based wage discrimination (Namlı, 2017).

According to the Gender Equality Index, Germany's gender equality increased steadily between 2013 and 2015. From 2013 to 2015, the score increased by 2.3 points; from 2019 to 2020, it increased from 66.9 to 67.9 points.

While Merkel had been influential in promoting gender equality at the national level, questions were raised about whether Merkel's foreign policy initiatives were really in line with the liberal feminist approach. This question was addressed by looking into four challenges Merkel had to face during her tenure as the Chancellor.

COVID-19 Pandemic: During the COVID-19 pandemic, Merkel was praised for playing a different role: understanding, kind, and fraternal Mutti (Mother) (Ramon-Pinat & Esteban, 2024). She used science, empathy, and open communication to strengthen public trust and solidarity while advancing coordinated EU responses. Rather than labelling the pandemic as a frightening crisis, she strongly outlines it as a great opportunity for democratic actions that elevate feminist approaches such as cooperation, collaboration, and participatory governance (David-Wilp et al., 2020). Merkel's government implemented population-wide interventions like mask-wearing, physical distancing, and testing procedures to restore public life and protect by lowering the personal risk of serious COVID-19 (Wieler et al., 2023). To lessen the negative economic effects, Germany's fiscal policymakers established a sizable stabilisation and €130 billion stimulus package, which included tax breaks, easy access to publicly subsidised credit, transfers to households and businesses, and increased public (investment) spending (Hinterlang et al., 2023). She carefully managed health and economic stability.

Refugee Crisis: Merkel's tenure as the chancellor was significantly influenced by the refugee crisis, which peaked in 2015. The crisis, which had been anticipated for some time, reached its climax in September 2015 alongside an unprecedented number of migrants arriving in Europe. The prolonged conflict in various regions, particularly in the Middle East, serves as a driving force for the rapid influx of refugees. Among European countries, Germany received the highest number of refugees. Merkel's decision to allow over one million refugees into Germany in 2015 was a watershed moment in German history, establishing the country as a supporter of refugees' rights. Her open-door policy was a bold humanitarian gesture that reflected feminist values such as compassion, inclusion, and maximising human security. Her famous statement "Wir schaffen das" ("We can do this") portrayed a hopeful,

optimistic, and empathetic narrative, clearly opposed to Europe's rising xenophobic and nationalistic sentiments (Koch et al., 2023; Müller-Brandeck-Bocquet, 2022). She pushed for long-term integration, legislative reforms, and policy measures for migration, asylum, and integration, thereby shaping Germany's image as a "Humanitarian role model". Further, Merkel viewed the refugee crisis as a great opportunity to test European values. Her efforts to defend asylum seekers and promote and protect international law were widely acknowledged by the international community.

Ukraine-Russia Relations: Handling Ukraine-Russia relations, especially following the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea, is a combination of both diplomatic engagement and realpolitik considerations. She highlighted the importance of diplomacy over military action and oversaw the EU's efforts to coordinate a collective response to tackle the Russian aggression. Even though many criticised it for its long-term effectiveness, Merkel played a key role in the Minsk agreement, reflecting her feminist preferences for peaceful conflict resolution and commitment to multilateralism. Merkel has dedicated dialogue with Russia and Ukraine, and her strategic approach emphasises the need for peace and collaboration, in contrast to male-oriented approaches that may escalate the growing tensions through military means.

However, the Minsk agreement and the German role remained controversial. Initially, it was presented as a peace initiative that intended to provide a comprehensive framework for diplomatic negotiations. Merkel's subsequent remarks thus questioned the true intentions of the agreements. Her statement, "The 2014 Minsk agreement was an attempt to give Ukraine time. It also used this time to become stronger, as you can see today" (Schwartz, 2022). This suggests that the agreements were not just an attempt to establish peace but also strategically buy Ukraine time to strengthen its military potential.

Germany's response to the Russian aggression can also be described as a strategic balancing act. Berlin sought to condemn Moscow's aggression for violating Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, Germany's economic dependency on Russia, especially in the energy and trade sectors, might compel Merkel to avoid from taking harsh measures that could cripple Germany's economic security.

Brexit: Merkel's response to Brexit and the EU integration highlights the strengths and limitations of the feminist leadership in the real world. As a female leader, she mainly prioritised stability, cohesion, and multilateralism to prevent further European Union fragmentation. She was concerned about preventing "Chain reactions" that could lead to other member countries leaving the European Union, potentially destabilising it. As the de facto leader of the bloc, her commitment to European regionalism is widely acknowledged by the state leaders of the EU. However, many believed that Merkel's reaction was influenced by both political strategy and personal considerations. As the EU's largest economy, Germany has significant economic ties with the UK. Therefore, Merkel would prefer Britain to remain in the EU to avoid the negative impact of Brexit on the German economy (Hogwood, 2016).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study affirms that while Angela Merkel did not specifically follow feminist foreign policy, her long-term leadership embodied many of its core values. In the domestic sphere, she actively promoted gender equality through important policy reforms by demonstrating a close alignment with liberal feminist principles. Thus, while her domestic policies align with feminist characteristics, her foreign policy was firmly rooted in the geopolitical realities that shape and influence the state's behaviour. As a result, Merkel's leadership should be viewed as a complex reciprocation between both feminist ideals and realpolitik considerations, emphasising the changing dynamics of global leadership.

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