

EDITED BY KATHERINE A. H. GRAHAM
AND ALLAN M. MASLOVE

HOW OTTAWA SPENDS

CANADA @150

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Chapter 10

CANADA'S FEMINIST INTERNATIONAL ASSISTANCE POLICY: BOLD STATEMENT OR FEMINIST FIG LEAF?

Stephen Brown and Liam Swiss

INTRODUCTION

On 9 June 2017, the Canadian government made foreign aid history by announcing the country's – and probably the world's – first “feminist international assistance policy”. Among other things, it promised that within four years, “at least 95 percent of Canada's bilateral international development assistance investments will either target or integrate gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls”, an unprecedented commitment (Canada 2017a).

As part of the international assistance review, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) held widespread consultations in 2016, in which over 15,000 people participated, across Canada and in 65 countries around the world (Canada 2017b). Repeated delays in releasing the result had left many observers sceptical about the process. However, its feminist approach was extremely positively received by Canadian development organizations, observers and the media.

This chapter examines the main components of the new aid policy, analyzing in turn 1) its focus on gender, women and girls, and the nature of the feminist approach; 2) some other key content, including priority areas and geographic focus, the role of the private sector and the issue of policy coherence; and 3) the question of aid funding. It argues that, though the feminist focus is ground-breaking and welcome, it is hampered by some important challenges. The refocusing of aid is promising, as is the commitment to reduce bureaucracy, while the focus on the private sector is more problematic, including in its relationship to promoting gender equality. The value of the new document is also hampered by the lack of policy coherence for development. The policy's

Achilles Heel, however, is the lack of financial resources to support it and provide a true platform for Canadian leadership in feminist foreign aid, as well as feminist foreign policy more broadly. While the feminist aid policy will buttress the Liberal government's feminist credentials, it will also provide a convenient fig leaf for the lack of political will to expand aid funding and decidedly unfeminist policies in other areas.

HOW FEMINIST?

Canada's recent approach to women's empowerment and gender equality has oscillated between the more conservative Women in Development (WID) approach and more progressive Gender and Development (GAD) approach, with the Harper government era marking a period of WID ascendancy (Tiessen 2016). The new policy marks a significant return to a GAD approach, which takes more seriously issues of structural inequalities and unequal power relations between men and women, rather than just trying to integrate women into development programs.

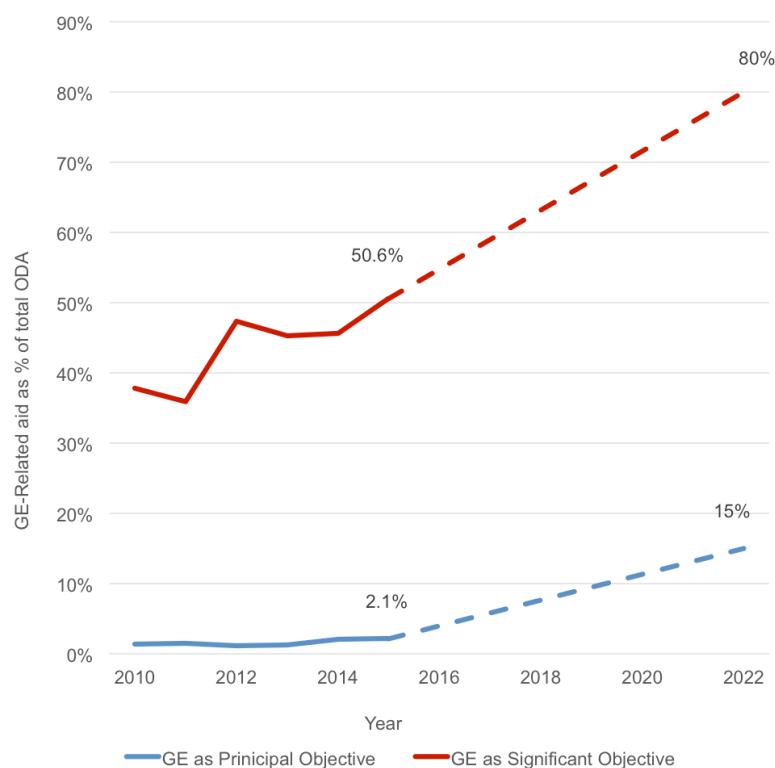
Without ever defining feminism, the policy outlines GAC's understanding of a feminist approach to international assistance as: human rights-based and inclusive; strategically focused on initiatives that best empower women and girls and reduce gender inequalities; challenging unequal power relations, discrimination and harmful norms and practices; and reliant on gender-based analysis while being accountable for results (Canada 2017a). Its focus on inclusivity, power, and even intersectional discrimination, make the policy as progressive a feminist document as one can imagine a federal government department could issue. Indeed, Canada is boldly positioned to become the feminist killjoy of international development assistance for years to come (Ahmed 2017).

As progressive and feminist as the policy is, some areas of concern remain; especially around the issue of instrumentalizing women and girls to achieve other development or foreign policy aims. This instrumentalist critique has been levelled at Canada's aid program previously around issues of security (Swiss 2012; Tiessen 2015a) and maternal and child health (Tiessen 2015b). In the new policy, this instrumentalist approach has diminished, but still appears occasionally when describing the empowerment of women and girls as a means of achieving other aims like global economic growth, peace and

security, and combating poverty. Undoubtedly, gender equality contributes to these outcomes, but the policy walks a fine line between being feminist for gender equality's sake and trying to convince others of the instrumental gains to be had from its feminist approach.

To implement the new feminist approach the policy commits to several new spending targets within the scope of the existing aid budget. Three directly relate to the feminist aims of the policy, while several others specify targets related to existing and ongoing aid priorities (such as maternal, newborn and child health, as well as climate change). The three targets related to gender equality are: 1) By 2021-2022, no less than 80 percent of Canadian international assistance will integrate gender equality or the empowerment of women and girls to achieve the policy's goals; 2) By 2021-2022, no less than 15 percent of Canadian international assistance will specifically target gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and (3) From 2017, \$150 million will be allocated over five years to local organizations that advance women's rights. Below, we briefly explore each of these in turn.

Figure 1. Past and Forecast ODA to Gender Equality



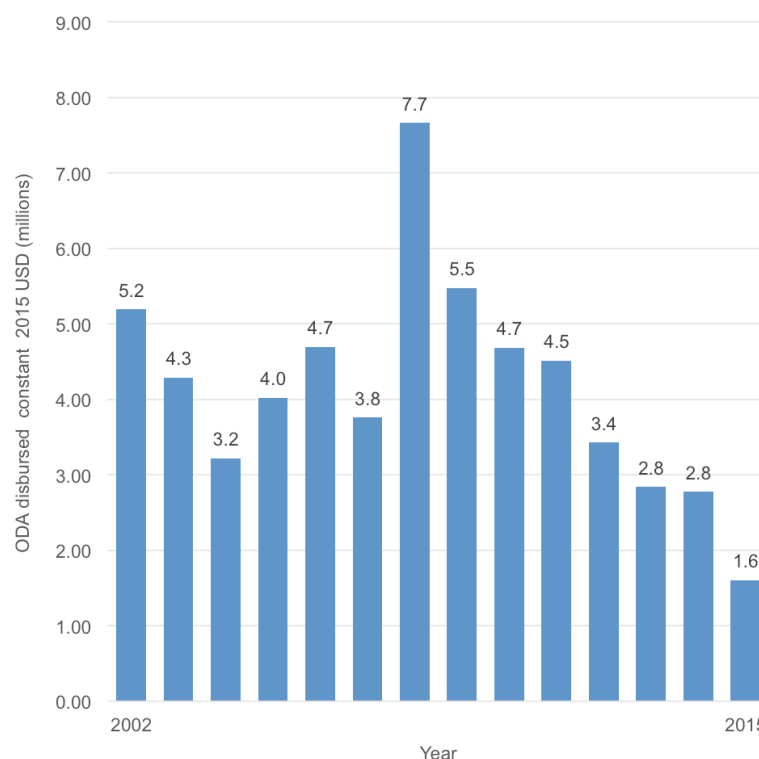
Source: OECD/DAC CRS Database <http://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=GENDER#>

Gender-Integrated (Mainstreamed) Aid: The commitment to spend at least 80 percent of Canada’s international assistance on initiatives which integrate gender equality and women’s empowerment is in keeping with past Canadian support for gender mainstreaming, despite the policy omitting the mainstreaming label. Eighty cents of every Canadian aid dollar will support programs which integrate gender equality even if the program is not primarily a gender project. This corresponds to aid which the Organisation for Economic Co-operation’s Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC, the main body grouping bilateral aid donors) identifies as having gender equality as a “significant objective”. DAC statistics for past Canadian aid spending in Figure 1 show that spending in this category ranged from about 38 percent in 2010 to just over 50 percent in 2015. Projecting forward to the 80 percent target by 2022 means expanding the proportion of gender mainstreamed programs by 60 percent and reaching an unprecedented level among DAC members in recent data. This means many new programs that might not have had gender equality as an aim will now include it, making almost all of Canadian aid supportive of gender equality and women’s empowerment in one way or another.

Gender-Targeted Aid: The more radical spending commitment in the new policy is to increase gender-targeted aid to 15 percent of all assistance by 2022. Figure 1 shows that in 2015 this category, which the DAC labels as having gender equality (GE) as a “principal objective”, amounted to just over 2 percent of Canadian assistance – in the bottom half of all DAC donors. Growing this amount more than sevenfold will make Canada the largest – by percentage – donor of GE-targeted aid in the world. To attain this target means both a greater number and larger scale of gender-targeted programming, though some of this may be achieved through targeted contribution to GE-specific multilateral or global funds dedicated to women’s rights and empowerment.

Combined, both commitments mean that by 2021-2022 no less than 95 percent of Canadian assistance will address gender equality and women’s empowerment in some fashion – a level that will far exceed any other DAC donor’s current commitments to both forms of gender programming.

Figure 2. ODA to Women's Equality Organisations and Institutions (DAC Sector code 15170)



Source: OECD/DAC CRS Database via QWIDS <https://stats.oecd.org/qwids/>

Aid to Women's Groups: The third notable commitment in the new policy is to spend \$150 million over five years through local organizations working to advance women's rights and empowerment. This earmarking of approximately \$30 million annually will enable Canada to continue and expand its tradition of supporting women's groups in recipient partner countries, an approach that had fallen out of favour in recent years. Figure 2 shows DAC statistics for Canadian spending in the category of "Support to Women's Equality Organisations and Institutions" between 2002 and 2015. From a high of US\$7.7 million in 2008 to a recent low of only US\$1.6 million in 2015, we can see that this approach to funding women's organizations declined sharply during the Harper years (Swiss and Barry 2017). Increasing spending on women's organizations nearly fifteen-fold from 2015 levels is, thus, a significant shift.

No operational details for this \$150 million are indicated in the new policy. It is likely it will be spread among many small gender equality funds administered at the country level to best connect with local organizations – an approach praised in the 2008 evaluation of gender policy and programming of

the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), which held primarily responsibility for aid at the time (Bytown Consuling and CAC International 2008).

How will these new spending targets affect existing and future programming both within and outside these areas? In one sense, the policy provides opportunities to reshape some existing commitments of Canada's aid programs in more feminist ways. For instance, it reiterates Canada's Harper-era commitment to invest \$3.5 billion in maternal, newborn, and child health, but extends it further by investing \$650 million over three years on sexual and reproductive health and rights – an area that was constrained under the Harper government. In this way, the new policy is tweaking existing programming priorities to better fit the feminist positioning of the policy.

The question of how the new policy spending targets constrain Canada's international assistance programming in areas that are neither gender-targeted nor gender-integrated is not answered in the policy. By committing to spend 95 percent of Canada's bilateral assistance on gender equality, this leaves only a small portion available to initiatives that do not address this concern. The consequence of such constraints could be either the rejection of developmentally beneficial but non-GE-oriented programs, or the hollowing out of the meaning of gender-integrated programs such that any aid initiative is deemed within the 95 percent envelope if it ticks certain boxes. Both outcomes would directly challenge the value of a feminist approach to international assistance. As the policy is implemented, GAC will need to mitigate both such risks.

Can GAC deliver on these feminist results and spending targets? In the 1980s, CIDA was a world leader on gender and development issues (McGill 2012; Swiss 2012; Tiessen 2016). With a rhetorical shift away from gender equality under the Harper government, the support for and delivery of gender equality programming in Canadian international assistance diminished. With this shift, some of the expertise and institutional inertia that had made Canada a leader was lost, despite the resilience demonstrated by some gender experts and others within the former CIDA (Tiessen 2016; Swiss and Barry 2017). Likely, GAC will require an intensive internal process of training, retraining, and recruitment to ensure that it is equipped with the skills and expertise required to deliver the feminist development results outlined by the policy. If so, a fuller institutionalization of feminist principles in the bureaucracy of

Canada's aid program could be a possible outcome of implementing the new policy, despite the challenges posed by the former CIDA's recent absorption by the diplomatic and trade arms of GAC.

KEY CONTENT

Although the focus on women, girls and gender equality was the most notable innovation in the new policy, below we outline five other key issues that stand out: the thematic and geographic concentration of aid, the issue of donor-driven aid, the role of the private sector, aid delivery, and policy coherence for development. Each is notable for what it says or does not say.

First, in the tradition of all new aid policy statements, the new policy lists a few overarching themes under which Canadian assistance can be placed. In the past, the government has called them areas of focus or priority themes. Now they are labelled "action areas":

1. Core Action Area: Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls
2. Human Dignity (health and nutrition, education, humanitarian action)
3. Growth That Works for Everyone
4. Environment and Climate Action
5. Inclusive Governance
6. Peace and Security

As in the past, the themes give the impression of focus but are in fact broad enough to accommodate virtually any activity that the government wants to undertake. The second one in particular, "human dignity", is so wide-ranging that it is a stretch to refer to it as a single area. The key difference in this iteration, however, is that, whereas gender equality had been a cross-cutting theme in the past, it has now been elevated to the single "core action area". Otherwise, this organization of programming into six areas is unlikely to have much impact.

Since 2002, the Canadian government has always had a list of 8–25 priority countries in which aid was to be concentrated. It modified this list every few years, leading to volatility and unpredictability and thus hurting the effective-

ness of Canada's aid program (Brown 2015). The new aid policy abolishes this practice, committing instead to focus primarily on a single region. It presents the rationale as follows: "Half of the world's poorest citizens live in sub-Saharan Africa. For that reason, Canada will ensure that no less than 50 percent of its bilateral international development assistance is directed to sub-Saharan African countries by 2021–22" (Canada 2017a). Although the figures are hard to interpret, notably what is included under the rubric of "bilateral international development assistance", this commitment will require a significant redirecting of resources to the Sub-Saharan Africa from other regions, since the overall budget is to remain constant.

Second, the new policy gives a very strong sense of aid being donor driven. It does briefly recognize the importance of local ownership: "To be effective, international assistance must respond to local needs and priorities. Partner country governments at all levels establish these priorities and they are – and will continue to be – primary partners for Canada's international assistance" (Canada 2017a). However, the policy very clearly sets Canada's own "feminist" priority. At times, the language can be quite directive. For instance, "Canada will require that women participate actively in the design and implementation of any climate adaptation or mitigation initiatives", even if Canada is only providing a fraction of the funding (Canada 2017a, *emphasis added*). Such conditions, no matter how well intentioned, could annoy partners and delay programs.

Thus, in some contexts, Canada's priorities will not be welcome. In a further example, Canada's new commitment to "the right to access safe and legal abortions" (Canada 2017a) will not be well received by the governments of an overwhelming majority countries in the priority region, Sub-Saharan Africa, where abortion is currently criminalized. It also remains to be seen what Canada's response will be when developing country partners identify priorities that do not specifically address gender, women or girls. In the wake of economic and political conditionalities, which have had limited degrees of success over the past decades, this policy might launch a new form of gender conditionality and could lead to sham or tokenistic compliance.

Third, the new policy places much emphasis on the role of the private sector in development. The main instrument for promoting this seems to be the government's planned Development Finance Institute (DFI). The DFI, as origi-

nally announced by the Conservative government in 2015, will receive \$300 million over a five-year period and will lend funds to (Canadian?) companies to encourage them to invest in developing countries. Tellingly, the DFI will be a subsidiary of Export Development Canada and, moreover, built up from scratch in Montreal, rather than seek synergies with Global Affairs Canada in Ottawa-Gatineau. It is unclear whether the funding will be counted as ODA, as well as how much its work will contribute to poverty reduction in general and more specifically to the betterment of the lives of women and girls.

All over the world, government interventions rather than market forces have been the main promoters of women's rights. The central goal of the private sector is to generate profit for company owners and shareholders. Corporate social responsibility and other voluntary charitable projects may generate some benefits for marginalized and disadvantaged people, but those are side activities, not core ones. The new aid policy expresses a desire "to encourage inclusive growth and create jobs and improve incomes – particularly for women and girls" (Canada 2017a). Nonetheless, beyond the promise of some assistance to women entrepreneurs, it will be a major challenge for the Canadian government to ensure that the benefits from its promotion of the private sector accrue primarily to women and reduce gender inequalities. It will also be harder to ensure accountability, especially in cases of "blended finance". The use of loans, rather than grants, could leave beneficiaries worse off if their ventures fail and they must still repay the capital provided from the Canadian government, with interest.

The policy does mention a commitment "to strengthening our policy framework to ensure Canadian companies reflect Canadian values, respect human rights and operate responsibly", but no detail is provided on how this will be achieved. Concretely, such measures could involve the creation of binding accountability mechanisms that would allow Canadian companies and their foreign subsidiaries to be sued in Canadian courts for acts committed in developing countries, where judicial remedies may be harder to obtain.

The appointment of an extractive sector ombudsman could serve as a useful mechanism in this regard, but the Trudeau government has so far shown little more enthusiasm for it than its predecessor has. Interestingly, the new policy makes no reference to the extractive sector at all, even though it was a significant policy plank of the Harper government's approach to foreign aid. It

is unclear what changes will follow: The current extractive-focused programs might be left to quietly run their course and then fade away, or perhaps the mining sector will benefit from the renewed promotion of the private sector.

Fourth, the policy promises to reduce the red tape for which Canadian aid has long been known: “We will streamline and accelerate our funding and reporting procedures to reduce the administrative burden on our funding recipients” (Canada 2017a). It also contains encouraging language about willingness to take “responsible risks” and base decisions on evidence. Little detail is provided, however, and to have a significant impact a basic change in culture will be required. GAC and its predecessor CIDA have been very bureaucratic, risk-averse and prone to political interference. No mention is made of decentralizing decision-making to the field, which had been raised numerous times during the consultations (Canada 2017b), suggesting that Canada’s aid program will remain one of the most centralized ones in the world.

The fifth and final issue area examined here is policy coherence for development, that is to say the degree to which non-aid policies complement aid in the promotion of international development. Achieving such synergies was one of the main justifications for merging CIDA with the then Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Tellingly, the government has undertaken a review of its foreign aid, but not its broader foreign policy or its trade policy. The new policy acknowledges that, “When it comes to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, a more integrated approach is needed – one that also includes diplomacy, trade and the expertise of a wide range of Canadian government departments and agencies” (Canada 2017a). However, it does not specify how the government will ensure this integration – or specify that it should apply to more than gender-related issues. The policy mentions in passing that “Canada is committed to a *progressive trade agenda*” (Canada 2017a, emphasis in original), but it seems to pertain only to new trade agreements.

What impact will a feminist, pro-development perspective have on the Canadian government’s international policies beyond aid? The fact that Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland barely mentioned aid or development in her major foreign policy speech to Parliament a few days before the release of the aid policy suggests that development assistance is an add-on and not central to Canadian foreign policy (Freeland 2017). What’s more, her strong emphasis

on hard power and increased defence spending (see below) appear antithetical to a feminist foreign policy. This instance is consistent with the government's previous decision to allow the sale billions of dollars of weapons to Saudi Arabia, one of the least respectful regimes of women's rights in the world and despite the fact that the arms would plausibly be used to repress the country's civilian population or to commit war crimes in neighbouring Yemen. Under the Trudeau government, Canada certainly talks the feminist talk, but it is reluctant to walk the feminist walk.

FINANCING

An aid policy's impact is highly dependent on its level of funding. During the consultations, government officials stated that a strong new policy would help them make the case for a significant aid budget increase. Because the policy was much delayed, the federal budget was released first, and it allocated no extra money for foreign aid for at least five years.

The government had been careful to moderate expectations. For instance, its discussion paper, released just before the consultations began, stated that hopes for a significant increase were "unrealistic [...] in the current fiscal context" (Global Affairs Canada 2016: 23). Nonetheless, the government's own summary of the consultations recognized that participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of allocating more resources to foreign aid and recommended reaching the UN target of 0.7% of gross national income (GNI), a level already met or exceeded by several European donors, including Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden and the United Kingdom (Canada 2017b; OECD 2017). Canada's contributions, at 0.26% of GNI, pale by comparison, and this ratio will fall in the years to come, as the Canadian economy grows.

Disappointment with a lack of Canadian generosity turned to outrage in the days preceding the release of the aid policy, when the Canadian government announced a massive increase in the defence budget. The media repeatedly highlighted the contrast, which the *Globe and Mail* pithily summarized as "Billions for the military and a lump of coal for foreign aid" (Clark 2017). Indeed, over a ten-year period, annual defence spending would rise from \$19 billion to \$33 billion, including \$15–19 billion for 88 new fighter jets, a higher number than the previous Conservative government had planned to purchase (Reuters 2017), while aid spending would remain frozen at \$5 billion. Clearly, the gov-

ernment could no longer use the fiscal context to support the narrative that a substantial aid budget increase was “unrealistic”, but finding a new justification proved challenging.

After announcing the new policy, Minister of International Development Marie-Claude Bibeau stated that “Our partners were asking not for money; that was not the first thing they were asking (for)” (Blanchfield 2017). Perhaps the interlocutors were too polite to ask for money “first”, but – as noted above – the government had already recognized that consultation participants repeatedly did recommend a major budget increase, which the government refused to do. Participants could hardly have been any more vocal on this issue and Canadian NGOs kept up the pressure in the run-up to the release of the 2017 federal budget, and subsequently protested the aid freeze quite visibly. As a result, the minister’s statement about the lack of pressure for more money seems rather disingenuous and misleading, if not an outright lie.

Instead, Bibeau’s added, partners “were asking for leadership. They said, ‘We need Canada around the table, we need Canada to speak loud and clear about progressive values’” (Blanchfield 2017). Although she presents an either/or scenario between funding and leadership, the two components are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are highly complementary, as money can significantly bolster leadership, while claims to leadership without a concomitant financial commitment lacks credibility and limits impact.

Bibeau herself and the new policy explicitly recognize the need for a massive increase in global development cooperation, “as much as US\$7 trillion by 2030”, to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (Bibeau 2017; see also Canada 2017a). However, despite the oft-repeated claims that “Canada is back” and “the world needs more Canada” (Bibeau 2017), the Canadian government is unwilling to carry its share the financial burden. Although the new policy refers to Canadian generosity (Canada 2017a), Canada’s official development assistance (ODA) is less generous than the average industrialized country’s, earning an unimpressive 15th place in 2016 (OECD 2017). Bibeau argued that, “It is essential to increase government contributions, but it is also especially important to step up our efforts to seek out new partners and new investors” (Bibeau 2017). Having decided reject the first option, Canada is instead turning to the second, hoping that other actors will increase their contributions. In particular, as discussed above, the Canadian government appears to be count-

ing on the private sector to promote development, in particular gender equality and the role of women and girls. However, as argued above, it is not clear how strong an instrument private finance is for achieving those goals.

The government hopes that “new funding mechanisms to encourage more innovative and cost-effective private- and voluntary-sector solutions to sustainable development challenges” will encourage “other donors to contribute to Canadian-administered initiatives” (Canada 2017a). Still, it is unclear to what extent other actors will be willing to contribute to Canadian efforts that the Canadian government is unwilling to finance itself. Canada wants to emulate Sweden’s leadership in putting in place an ambitious feminist foreign policy. However, unlike Sweden, it is not willing to support it with the aid funding it requires.

Without additional resources, the Canadian government won’t be able to promote its feminist agenda without it being at the expense of other areas of foreign aid. In addition, it will have to wait for current projects to wind down to free up funds for new initiatives. As a result, there is likely to be a relatively slow uptake of new programs put in place.

CONCLUSION

Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy promises a significant focusing of Canadian efforts on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls across its aid programming, but may face significant implementation challenges. Such focus, despite the breadth of some of the “action areas”, has been uncommon in past Canadian aid policies. However, gender conditionality may run the risk of boxing Canada’s aid program into a corner when it comes to initiatives that do not address gender equality and by reducing the government’s flexibility to respond to the changing aid landscape over the next few years. The full extent of the Trudeau government’s feminist principles will be revealed in whether the new policy exists as a tokenistic feminist bubble, which allows use of feminist label and acts as a feminist fig leaf for major initiatives in other foreign policy areas (especially defence) that are not feminist, or if these principles are eventually extended to all parts of foreign policy, similar to the Swedish approach. Without additional funding for international assistance, and without extending feminist principles to the rest of Canada’s foreign policy, it remains to be seen whether the Feminist Inter-

national Assistance Policy will mark a revolutionary change in Canada's aid policy and programming, or be little more than a principled feminist statement without the will required to apply it more broadly.

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