Built on shaky ground: Reflections on Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy

Jessica Cadesky
University of Ottawa

Abstract
In October 2017, Canada launched its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP). While Canada’s explicit use of the words “feminist” and “feminism” may be refreshing, critical questions on the FIAP’s interpretation and application of these concepts remain. These challenges are not unique to the FIAP. Rather, the central weaknesses of the FIAP can be seen as symptomatic of several endemic challenges that persist in the current policies and practices that seek to promote gender equality in the developing world and beyond. This article presents the theoretical and conceptual lineage that has informed the FIAP, drawing from challenges present within literature on security, gender equality, and gender mainstreaming. Three main shortcomings relevant to both the literature and the FIAP are explored: first, the assumptions and essentialization of “gender” to mean “women”; second, the frequent conflation of “gender equality” with “women’s empowerment”; and last, the paradox of gender, gender equality, and feminism being simultaneously over-politicized and depoliticized to suit prevailing policy environments, with particular implications for the global coronavirus pandemic, as well as impacts in fragile and conflict-affected states. This analysis sheds light on persistent challenges in feminist foreign policymaking and offers insights for the development of Canada’s White Paper on feminist foreign policy.

Keywords
Feminist foreign assistance policy, gender equality, women, empowerment, discourse, fragile and conflict-affected states, COVID-19

Corresponding author:
Jessica Cadesky, University of Ottawa, School of International Development and Global Studies, 120 University Private, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6NS, Canada.
Email: jcade082@uottawa.ca
In October 2017, Canada unveiled its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), with the stated aim to “eradicate poverty and build a more peaceful, more inclusive and more prosperous world.”1 Greeted by a mix of enthusiasm and skepticism, this “feminist” policy is rooted in the assertion that “promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is the most effective approach to achieving this goal.”2 While the explicit use of the term “feminist” may be helpful in advancing Canada’s position as a global leader with progressive values and norms, the FIAP encompasses several weaknesses that hinder its full potential to promote feminist goals. While further analysis and critique of the FIAP is surely warranted (and no doubt forthcoming from both academic and civil society circles as progress is scrutinized), we must acknowledge that the FIAP exists in neither a theoretical nor a conceptual vacuum. Rather, the policy can and should be understood as symptomatic of several endemic challenges that persist in the current development policies and practices that seek to promote gender equality in the developing world and beyond. Reflections and lessons learned from the critical analyses of the FIAP to date, including critiques within this special issue, also provide insights for shaping Canada’s feminist foreign policy and the much-anticipated White Paper. Protracted and emerging crises—including the COVID-19 global pandemic, humanitarian emergencies, and (in)security challenges related to fragile and conflict-affected states—reinforce the need for policy coherence across government departments, as well as for a comprehensive feminist foreign policy strategy. The FIAP in its current state offers an important starting point for reflecting on the past, present, and future of Canada’s foreign policy because of its explicit feminist approach.

Canada’s feminist branding of policy emerges at a time of increased political momentum around gender with new and renewed commitments toward gender equality by various states, signalling what Jennifer Thomson identifies as a feminist turn in foreign policy.3 As of 2019, feminist foreign policies have been adopted by Sweden and Mexico, with France and Luxembourg intending to put forth feminist foreign policies in the near future.4 However, as Thomson rightly points out, the lack of an overarching normative text that defines feminism or what makes a policy feminist has resulted in a wide variety of interpretations.5 While this ambiguity may provide a certain flexibility to apply feminist principles through a multitude of lenses, the risk is that the term may be stripped of its transformational potential and even be used to provide political cover to support investments that fall short of transforming patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality.

1. Global Affairs Canada, “Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy,” Global Affairs Canada, Government of Canada, Ottawa, 2017, vii.
2. Global Affairs Canada, “Canada’s Feminist International,” vii.
3. Jennifer Thomson, “The growth of feminist (?) foreign policy,” E-International Relations, 10 February 2020 https://www.e-ir.info/2020/02/10/the-growth-of-feminist-foreign-policy/ (accessed 2 May 2020).
4. Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy, “Feminist foreign policy,” Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy https://centreforfeministforeignpolicy.org/feminist-foreign-policy (accessed 5 May 2020).
5. Ibid.
In this article, I present three interrelated issues endemic to Canada’s FIAP and illustrate how they work together to impede the policy’s potential impact: first, the problematic assumptions and essentialization of “gender” to mean “women”; second, the frequent conflation of “gender equality” with “women’s empowerment”; and last, the paradox of feminism, gender, and gender equality being simultaneously over-politicized and depoliticized to suit prevailing policy environments. The article explores how each of these challenges plays out at both the policy and practical levels, including Canada’s evolving international response to the current coronavirus pandemic. Drawing upon a review of relevant literature on gender and security, the article illustrates the pervasiveness and practical harm of recreating and reinstitutionalizing these errors in both conception and application. The article concludes by offering some final reflections on the implications for further policy and practice of gender equality, as well as identifying some current gaps that require further research and analysis.

Assumptions and essentialization: Gender equality policy and practice built on shaky ground

Feminist analysts have made great strides in demonstrating that development is an inherently gendered process, beginning in the 1970s with Ester Boserup’s groundbreaking work including women as a category of analysis in agriculture in Africa. Since then, a multitude of feminists of several theoretical traditions have made impactful contributions toward bringing gender into center focus in both development policy and practice. Arguably, one of the most important of these contributions is the understanding of gender (in)equality as a dynamic process that is rooted in unequal gendered power relations. This structural focus is a departure from conceptualizations of gender to mean only women, and allows for an analysis and understanding of social processes that underlie women’s (and some men’s) oppression and vulnerability through analyzing power relations.

Despite this theoretical contribution, many of the policies and practices that make up the dominant development norms and agendas around gender assume a largely essentialist approach, whereby women are lumped into one monolithic category and assigned a set of characteristics or roles, such as mother or carer. This approach is exemplified in Susan Willett’s analysis of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, the hallmark 2000 Resolution recognizing the disproportionate impact of armed conflict levied on women and girls. Willett underlines that UNSCR 1325 embodies an essentialist approach whereby gender is interpreted as women, and where women are defined by their differences relative to men. This criticism of UNSCR 1325 is echoed by Nadine Puechguirbal, who emphasizes

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6. See discussion in Eva M. Rathgeber, “WID, WAD, GAD: Trends in research and practice,” The Journal of Developing Areas 24, no. 4 (1990): 489–502.
7. Susan Willett, “Introduction: Security Council Resolution 1325: Assessing the impact on women, peace and security,” International Peacekeeping 17, no. 2 (2010): 142–158.
that, as a foundational instrument of the global Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, UNSCR 1325 conceptualizes and depicts women as belonging to one or more of only three categories: as vulnerable, as civilians, and as mothers.\textsuperscript{8} Further to the notion that women’s only role is that of mother and caregiver, so many policies juxtapose women and children that Puechguirbal has diagnosed a new disease to reflect this pervasive practice: the “women and children syndrome.”\textsuperscript{9} We have seen a strain of this disease before: in 1990, Cynthia Enloe referred to the constant framing in development discourse of women and children as similarly vulnerable, and therefore regularly appearing beside one another in lists of groups that require special protection and consideration. Enloe’s use of the contracted term “women and children” demonstrates how these essentialized, monolithic, and so-called naturally vulnerable groups of people appear in development policies and instruments.\textsuperscript{10}

Prior to the launch of the FIAP, Canadian feminist researchers highlighted how foreign and domestic policy in Canada during the Harper era effectively promoted gender essentialism, which ran counter to the agency women exhibited globally as peace and development agents.\textsuperscript{11} Deborah Stienstra demonstrates that Canadian policies to address both gender and disability tapped into different networks that operated in silos, instead of adopting a more useful intersectional approach.\textsuperscript{12} This effectively drove a wedge between women’s and disabled persons’ organizations, which made it difficult for these groups to join forces in the face of cutbacks under the Harper government.\textsuperscript{13} Similarly, in developing contexts, disabled women often struggle to find space and representation within both feminist and disability rights movements, often falling between the two, as feminist efforts do not fully address issues of disability, while disability rights groups often do not adopt a fully feminist-inspired agenda.\textsuperscript{14}

The tendency for Canadian policies to essentialize women and girls is also perpetuated by the FIAP. The FIAP continually lumps women in with girls within the framing of vulnerable people. This practice reveals not only how the policy essentializes women as vulnerable, but also a failure to account for the ways in which different groups of women—and some men—are both multiply marginalized or

\textsuperscript{8} Nadine Puechguirbal, “Discourses on gender, patriarchy and Resolution 1325: A textual analysis of UN Documents,” \textit{International Peacekeeping} 17, no. 12 (2010): 172–187.

\textsuperscript{9} Puechguirbal, “Discourses on gender, patriarchy and Resolution 1325,” 175.

\textsuperscript{10} Cynthia Enloe, “Women and children: Making feminist sense of the Persian Gulf Crisis,” \textit{The Village Voice}, 25 September 1990.

\textsuperscript{11} See Rebecca Tiessen, “Gender essentialism in Canadian foreign aid commitments to women, peace, and security,” \textit{International Journal: Canada’s Journal of Global Policy Analysis} 70, no. 1 (2015): 84–100.

\textsuperscript{12} Deborah Stienstra, “Lost without way-finders? Disability, gender and Canadian foreign and development policy,” in Rebecca Tiessen and Stephen Baranyi, eds., \textit{Obligations and Omissions: Canada’s Ambiguous Actions on Gender Equality} (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2017), 115.

\textsuperscript{13} Stienstra, “Lost without way-finders?”, 120.

\textsuperscript{14} Anita Ghai, “Disabled women: An excluded agenda of Indian feminism,” \textit{Hypatia} 17, no. 3 (2002): 49–66.
advantaged depending on their ethnicity, religion, age, (dis)ability, and other factors of identity. In its discussion on discrimination, the FIAP does make the important point that women and girls are “not the only groups that face discrimination and inequality,” citing socio-economic status, race, sexuality, and migrant/refugee status amongst factors of discrimination. However, this recognition is immediately followed with a return to focus on women and girls, stating that through empowering women and girls and working toward gender equality, “we send the clear message that equality is for everyone.” Two main issues stand out here. First, it is unclear how empowering women and girls will expand benefits or protection against discrimination for other groups. Second, “women and girls” is a sweeping category comprising individuals who have multiple factors of identity that cut across various intersections of oppression and privilege. The representation of women as being reduced and essentialized in this way offers a simplistic, incomplete understanding of the roles that women—not to mention men and other gender identities—play, particularly in situations of conflicts and emergencies. Adopting a more intersectional approach that deconstructs groups of all women or all girls is imperative.

Looking at the current COVID-19 pandemic, applying an intersectional lens reveals important insights into its impact, including who may be at heightened risk of infection and who may bear the brunt of care work. A recent global gender analysis in fragile and conflict-affected states highlights that those above 60 years of age and people with disabilities are amongst the most vulnerable to contracting the disease, while women health workers face a double burden of providing care at home and at work. Taking direction from a foreign assistance policy that focuses on women and girls as a broad category is insufficient to address the real-world impacts of emergencies such as the coronavirus pandemic on certain subsets of this group, and therefore restricts the potential impact of the FIAP.

Gender equality and women’s empowerment: A false equation

Another error commonly reflected in policies and instruments addressing gender equality has been the tendency to equate gender equality with women’s empowerment. Although these ideas may be concurrently pursued as part of a broader feminist agenda, there are indeed critical distinctions between the two concepts. Women’s empowerment places the focus on women’s individual processes of harnessing and mobilizing various resources—both external and intrinsic within an individual. Naila Kabeer’s framework of resources, agency, and achievements interprets women’s empowerment interventions as operating from the understanding that women begin in a state of “disempowerment,” and undergo a process of “empowerment,” with their progress being measured against this individual

15. Global Affairs Canada, “Canada’s Feminist International,” 2.
16. Ibid, 2.
17. International Rescue Committee and CARE International, “Global rapid gender analysis for COVID-19”, IRC and CARE, 2020, 2.
baseline. This understanding differs from gender equality, which focuses on structure rather than the agency of individual women. In its application of gender equality, Canada’s GBA+ framework moves beyond a binary understanding of gender equality, “to assess how diverse groups of women, men and non-binary people may experience policies, programs and initiatives.” While structural changes required to promote and achieve gender equality may include or encompass the agency-focused interventions aligned with goals of women’s empowerment, to conflate the two within policy and practice is problematic.

While the false equation of gender equality to women’s empowerment is problematic at the theoretical level, at the policy level this conflation can have practical ramifications. As Mara Goldman and Jani Little argue, although women’s empowerment may have been useful as a practical goal to mobilize development resources and efforts, women’s empowerment has been “hollowed out” and applied to development without use of power or processes. Jay Drydyk points to a confusion amongst development actors in their application of empowerment, illustrated by UNDP’s Human Development Report from 2000, which mentions “empowerment” throughout the document, but with various meanings and no discussion of what these applications have in common. Applications such as this, where empowerment is dislocated from social relations, cease to be a transformative concept. As we will see in a later section, other gender equality tools, such as gender mainstreaming, have suffered the same charge, as once-powerful concepts become watered down through the translation of policy and practice.

The conflation of gender equality and women’s empowerment poses methodological challenges at the practical level, which has implications for measuring impacts of projects or interventions. A lack of nuanced understanding of the differences between the two concepts often results in women’s empowerment programs being interpreted and counted as investments in gender equality, therefore making it nearly impossible to analyze them separately. In the Canadian context, Liam Swiss and Jessica Barry illustrate how shifts in the coding of CIDA-funded projects led to different results for the levels of investment governments have in gender equality. Their research reveals that such investments often have less to do with the extent to which gender equality has been integrated into projects than how projects are coded.

18. Naila Kabeer, “Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women’s empowerment,” Development and Change 30, no. 3 (1999): 435–464.
19. Status of Women Canada, “What is GBA+? Gender Based Analysis Plus,” Government of Canada, Ottawa, https://cfc-swc.gc.ca/gba-acs/index-en.html (accessed 7 May 2020).
20. Mara Goldman and Jana Little, “Innovative Grassroots NGOs and the complex processes of women’s empowerment: An empirical investigation from Northern Tanzania,” World Development 66 (2015): 762–777.
21. Jay Drydyk, “Empowerment, agency, and power” Journal of Global Ethics 9, no. 3 (2013): 1–14.
22. Drydyk, “Empowerment, agency and power,” 254.
23. Liam Swiss and Jessica Barry, “Did changes in official language lead to spending shifts?” in Rebecca Tiessen and Stephen Baranyi, eds., Obligations and Omissions: Canada’s Ambiguous Actions on Gender Equality (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s Press, 2017), 31.
Although women’s empowerment has become a banner under which countless programs and policies have aligned, it has shifted the spotlight away from structural issues of social and economic justice and onto the self-improving individual. The relational perspective is lost here, and the root causes of a lack of empowerment in the first place become difficult to uncover. As Ann Whitehead posits, “women” is not an adequate analytical category since the social constitution of gender that maintains relations of inequality and injustice must be the focus, not the social constructs themselves, the latter being an approach that looks solely at differences between men and women. Despite these differences, gender equality and women’s empowerment are too often conflated in policy documents and in practice. For example, “gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls” is the first Core Action Area of Canada’s FIAP. A closer inspection reveals that all subsequent mentions of gender equality in the policy are followed by “women’s empowerment” or “the empowerment of women and girls” or a similar construction, leading this author to conclude that Enloe’s “womenandchildren” syndrome has mutated into a “genderequalityandwomen’sempowerment” strain in Canada.

The FIAP repeatedly confounds the two concepts. The FIAP asserts that “[b]y eliminating barriers to equality and helping to create better opportunities, women and girls can be powerful agents of change and improve their own lives and those of their families, communities and countries. This is a powerful way to reduce poverty for everyone.” The policy goes on to correlate gender equality with a variety of other development goals, from driving economic growth, to reducing chronic hunger, to peacebuilding, to reducing discrimination. It is, of course, important to recognize the various roles that women and girls play in each of these realms, and increasing their participation is a laudable goal, but is this truly a feminist approach if efforts effectively stop there? At first glance, one understands that the FIAP will tackle both structural causes of gender equality—through “eliminating barriers” and “creating opportunities”—as well as improving agency of women and girls—to become “powerful agents of change.” Although the FIAP states that “gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are objectives in their own right for transforming social norms and power relations,” the prevailing emphasis of the policy rests not on gender equality as a goal unto itself, but rather as a vehicle to deliver the larger development goal of poverty reduction. In this instrumentalist approach, Maxine Molyneux terms women as “conduits of policy,” or a means used to pursue other ends.

24. Srilatha Batliwala and Deepa Dhanraj, “Gender myths that instrumentalize women: A view from the Indian frontline,” IDS Bulletin, 35, no. 4 (2004): 11–18.
25. Ann Whitehead, “Some preliminary notes on the subordination of women” IDS Bulletin, 10, no. 3 (1979): 10–13.
26. Global Affairs Canada, “Canada’s Feminist International,” 16.
27. Ibid, vi.
28. Maxine Molyneux, “Mothers at the service of the new poverty agenda: Progressa/Oportunidades, Mexico’s conditional transfer programme,” Journal of Social Policy and Administration, 40, No. 4 (2006): 425–49.
The FIAP seems to suggest that a wide array of development goals is possible as soon as the power of women and girls is released from the shackles that currently hold them down. Women and girls are, therefore, responsibilized as vessels of potential to bring about positive development, not only for themselves, but for their families and communities.

Currently, Canada’s international response thus far to the COVID-19 pandemic is informed by and therefore suffers from the FIAP’s tendencies to at once essentialize women and girls as vulnerable victims and heap the additional burden upon them to address humanitarian challenges. In a April 5th 2020 news release, Global Affairs Canada announced that Canada’s assistance plan to date is in line with its feminist international assistance approach, citing that the pandemic has the potential to “exacerbate inequalities and reverse development gains,” which is “especially true for the women and children who are already amongst the world’s poorest and most vulnerable citizens and may now be expected to take on additional caregiving responsibilities in their families and communities.”

Again, the essentializing language of “women and girls,” in this case “women and children,” as poor victims carries through to the pandemic response. Moreover, while the announcement recognizes the impact the pandemic will have on inequalities, it is ironic that the increased responsibilities of women and girls in caregiver roles is of concern, while the mammoth burden that the FIAP places on women and girls to be drivers of their own development and that of their communities does not seem to draw the same concern.

**The paradox of over-politicizing/depoliticizing gender and feminism**

The politicization and depoliticization of gender equality and feminism may be one of the greatest challenges facing the application of gender equality tools and concepts for policy and practice. Effectively translated, such concepts are potentially transformative, eventually promoting durable gender equality in the developing world and beyond. Yet, despite progress in recent decades in bringing a gender analysis into mainstream development discourse and practice, backsliding can take place and gender equality tools and concepts that were once developed to be transformative have been neutralized. At the same time, concepts and tools related to gender equality have been over-politicized to serve larger political interests, leading to co-optation, misapplication, or erasure. In this section, I will discuss the paradox of gender equality policies being at once both over-politicized and depoliticized.

29. Global Affairs Canada, “Canada’s support for international efforts to fight the COVID-19 pandemic,” Global Affairs Canada, Government of Canada, 5 April 2020, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2020/04/canadas-support-for-international-efforts-to-fight-the-covid-19-pandemic.html (accessed 5 May 2020).
Speaking to the context of humanitarian and development responses in refugee settings, Elisabeth Olivius argues that a major shortcoming in the practical application of gender and gender equality principles in current development practice is that the term gender is used to mean “being attuned to differences between women and men and seeking to take them into account to design effective aid programmes.” She argues that this effectively sidesteps the feminist, political goals of gender equality that would see policies and interventions engaged with structural inequality and disadvantage. Taking this criticism further, Andrea Cornwall has lamented that the term gender in and of itself has been sanitized, that “its political and analytical bite has been blunted not only by the lack of specificity in its use, but also by the process of its domestication by development agencies.”

An examination of the literature on gender equality supports Cornwall’s criticism of a subdued and apolitical version of gender equality adopted in development policy and practice. As the above discussion on the conflation of gender equality and women’s empowerment demonstrates, how gender has been interpreted and deployed in efforts to address gender equality has shifted and has profoundly modified “the very terms of the debates we engage in.”

The process of depoliticization extends beyond how gender equality is understood at the policy level, and extends its reach to the dominant tools that have been promoted as the best way to achieve gender equality, such as gender mainstreaming. Widely acknowledged as the first to coin the term gender mainstreaming, Rounaq Jahan identifies two types of strategies that have been developed to ensure that the perspectives of men and women are reflected in policies and practice: first, the integrationist approach, which is reflective of an outdated ‘add gender and stir’ agenda that adds gender issues into the existing spectrum of development sectors; and second, the agenda-setting approach, where women, as opposed to gender-less individuals, get recognition in the mainstream of development. Despite the widespread adoption of gender mainstreaming by development agencies and donors, Lisa Ann Richey observes that it is the former approach, not the potentially transformative one, that is typically used in practice. Jane Parpart concludes that the existing gap between the “promise and performance” of gender mainstreaming as a tool to deliver transformative change and promote gender equality persists. Parpart cites several rhetorical statements made by the UN,
the World Bank, and other norm-setting institutions on the need to mainstream women into key sectors; however, the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming has yet to be fully realized.\textsuperscript{36} Hilary Standing takes up the criticism of how gender mainstreaming has been applied in development, and identifies a dual process that has been more harmful than helpful.\textsuperscript{37} According to Standing, these processes work simultaneously, where (1) gender mainstreaming is over-politicized when it is linked to resources to be competed for; and (2) gender mainstreaming is depoliticized when it becomes a process to produce toolkits and checklists. This paradox of depoliticization/politicization was earlier articulated by Sylvia Walby, who delineates the “technical version” of gender mainstreaming (i.e. the use of tools) from the “political version” of gender mainstreaming, which promotes gender equality in all policies.\textsuperscript{38}

While the application of gender equality, gender mainstreaming and gender to development policy and practice is often depoliticized, they can paradoxically—and sometimes simultaneously—become over-politicized. When gender is depoliticized, as above, this act is inherently political. The original transformational purpose and character of gender and related tools to challenge the very structures that produce and reproduce discrimination in developing contexts are disarmed and rendered ineffective. However, while depoliticization may be a more insidious process, there have been overt moves to politicize gender equality tools and concepts for various purposes. For example, Rebecca Tiessen and Krystel Carrier discuss how the rhetorical language of Canadian government policies under the Harper Conservatives effectively erased “gender equality” and replaced it with “equality between men and women.”\textsuperscript{39} Although slight, this reframing of equality has important implications for how policies are translated into practice. The narrowing of “gender equality” to apply only to men and women effectively squeezed out of frame anyone falling outside this constructed gender binary, such as transgender individuals, as well as retracted any focus on the ways in which institutions, policies, and practices themselves are gendered.\textsuperscript{40} Practically, this shift had implications for how CIDA\textsuperscript{41} staff were able to carry out their work, which resulted in a delay of key government initiatives on gender due to internal disputes; the omission of gender and women in the G8 Muskoka Initiative on maternal, newborn, and child health; and a preference for funding programs that addressed women

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{36}Parpart, “Exploring the transformative potential of gender mainstreaming,” 384.
\bibitem{37}Hilary Standing, “Gender, myth and fable: The perils of mainstreaming in sector bureaucracies,” \textit{IDS Bulletin} 35, no. 4: (2007): 82–88.
\bibitem{38}Susan Walby, “Gender mainstreaming: Productive tensions in theory and practice,” \textit{Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society} 12, no. 3 (2005): 321–343.
\bibitem{39}Rebecca Tiessen and Krystel Carrier, The erasure of “gender” in Canadian foreign policy under the Harper Conservatives: The significance of the discursive shift from “gender equality” to “equality between women and men,” \textit{Canadian Foreign Policy Journal} 21 no. 2 (2015): 95.
\bibitem{40}Ibid, 95.
\bibitem{41}Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) was the previous federal agency that administered international development programs and policies. CIDA was merged with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) in 2013. In 2015, DFAIT was renamed Global Affairs Canada.
and girls as opposed to those interventions that sought to address the root causes of gender inequality. Returning to the FIAP, the very same overemphasis on women and girls may squeeze out critical space for development actors to work on issues that contribute to gender inequality and patriarchal structures. While in line with Canada’s self-image as a progressive, “women-friendly” state, the FIAP’s emphasis on women and girls at the heart of the policy is actually reflective of a Canadian foreign policy legacy that was characteristic of the Harper Conservative era.

The FIAP asserts that its “feminist approach is based on the conviction that all people should enjoy the same fundamental human rights and be given the same opportunities to succeed.” While the FIAP takes on progressive language of feminism and gender equality, the lack of a clear definition of feminism, in particular, may render the policy vulnerable to less transformative interpretations of feminism that may not necessarily address the larger multi-dimensional structural obstacles the prevent a full expression of gender equality. In her assessment, Tiessen points out that, while the application of feminist language creates “conceptual ambiguity,” the overall orientation of the FIAP is more reflective of liberal/mainstream feminism, which focuses on participation of women rather than a more transformative agenda. Laura Parisi charges that the FIAP embodies the rhetoric of feminist neoliberalism, which in turn limits the potential impact of the policy. Parisi’s analysis of the FIAP’s instrumentalization of women, particularly within the realm of economic development, is evidence of a type of feminism that avoids thorny issues of masculinities and patriarchal structures. In order to be truly transformational, a feminist policy’s interpretation and application of feminism need to tackle the patriarchal structures that underwrite gender inequality. Without this more ambitious direction, the FIAP’s liberal interpretation of feminism that focuses on women and girls risks leading to what Deniz Kandiyoti terms “feminism lite,” whereby “interventions in the name of women may end up serving to further disempower those for who they are intended.”

Political interests and dominant (read: patriarchal) norms influence if and how gender equality and feminism are depoliticized and/or over-politicized. Maria Stratigaki posits that introducing gender mainstreaming across EU policies has been “largely used as an alibi for neutralising positive action”—dismantling women’s political machinery and committing no new resources in its place.
This criticism echoes the common lament of gender mainstreaming, that “everybody’s business too often becomes no one’s business,” often without any accompanying budget commitments. 48

The depoliticization/politicization paradox can be seen in Canadian development policy. Tiessen and Carrier found that under the Conservative Harper government, CIDA’s shift of language, from “gender equality” to “equality between men and women” may have been politically motivated, whereby equality was reframed to better reflect the Conservatives’ stance on issues they saw as related, such as homosexuality, gender identity, and abortion. 49 Over-politicization and/or depoliticization can also be a deliberate strategy to reorient feminist and gender equality policies that would otherwise be rejected if too explicitly named. In Australia, for example, pro-gender norms have been pushed through foreign aid and development policies “by stealth” in order to avoid a domestic debate on an explicitly feminist foreign policy. 50

In order to work through the depoliticization/politicization paradox, gender equality must be dissociated from its current misuse and misapplication and be reconnected with its original feminist political project. Drawing from the context of Burmese refugees in Bangladesh and Thailand, Olivius argues that gender mainstreaming in humanitarian aid has been utterly co-opted, with women’s participation not only insufficient to reach gender equality goals, but also often instrumentalized to optimize the efficiency and effectiveness of aid. 51 Olivius proposes a solution whereby development actors and analysts re-engage with the political project of feminism in order to counter this depoliticization. 52 Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis go further, proposing a fourth-generation stop on the WID-WAD-GAD 53 evolution: FAD 2, or Feminism and Development and Disasters. 54 Born out of research in Sri Lanka in the early 2000s, the term at once signals a shift toward a more transformative feminist approach that sidesteps the neutralization of the term gender, as well as the interrelated nature of development and disasters. A third proposal was developed by Joan Eveline and Carol Bacchi. Highlighting that gender mainstreaming and reaching the ultimate goal of gender equality is a process, they call for a linguistic shift, whereby the term gender

47. Maria Stratigaki, “Gender mainstreaming vs. positive action: An ongoing conflict in EU gender equality policy,” European Journal of Women’s Studies 12, no. 2 (2005): 167.
48. Bytown Consulting and C.A.C. International, Evaluation of CIDA’s Implementation of its Policy on Gender Equality (Gatineau: CIDA, 2008).
49. Ibid.
50. Karin Aggestam and Jacqui True, “Gendering foreign policy: A comparative framework for analysis,” Foreign Policy Analysis 16, No. 2 (2020): 143–162, 157.
51. Olivius, “Displacing equality?”, 113.
52. Ibid.
53. Women in Development (WID), Women and Development (WAD), Gender and Development (GAD); see Rathgeber, 1990 for more details on the theoretical distinctions and practical applications of the WID-WAD-GAD continuum.
54. Jennifer Hyndman and Malathi de Alwis, “Beyond gender: Towards a feminist analysis of humanitarianism and development in Sri Lanka,” Women’s Studies Quarterly 31, no.3–4 (2003): 212–226.
is used as a verb rather than a noun, which would re-focus attention on the process of gendering rather than on the supposed static category of gender. The most comprehensive and radical proposal, and perhaps that which has the greatest potential at reviving the gender equality agenda, is Cornwall’s, who suggests that, in order to effectively mobilize gender to uncover structures of power and promote transformation, “the concept of gender may itself need to be disinterred from the uses to which the term ‘gender’ has been put in gender and development.” Framing the FIAP as “feminist” successfully sidesteps the linguistic baggage that weighs down the term gender, and thus refocuses attention toward an arguably fresher and more ambitious-sounding feminist agenda. However, the favourable optics of a feminist foreign policy do not consistently track with its narrow application of feminism.

As its sixth Action Area on Peace and Security, the FIAP commits to supporting greater participation of women and women’s organizations in peace negotiations and conflict prevention; advancing women’s rights in post-conflict state building; and helping prevent and respond to sexual violence and enforce a zero-tolerance policy for sexual exploitation committed by Canadian peacekeepers. These pressing issues are in line with the WPS Agenda as enshrined in UN Security Council Resolution 1325, and are therefore supported by an international framework. Strengthening Canada’s commitments to the WPS Agenda also helps to legitimize the Trudeau Liberals’ branding as distinctly feminist. This branding has been underwritten by gender equality rhetoric and feminist policies such as the FIAP. However, the potential for the FIAP to provide political cover for more insidious policies that are counterproductive to gender equality and other feminist goals should raise concerns. For example, a controversial deal to provide Saudi Arabia with light armoured vehicles (LAV) has been a sticking point for the current Liberal government, which has been criticized for providing equipment that could be weaponized by the Saudi regime against its own people as well as through its engagement in the armed conflict in Yemen. Although exporting arms to Saudi Arabia was previously suspended, the LAV contract was renegotiated in April 2020 and appears to be going ahead. The deal has been condemned by activists and analysts who point out the hypocrisy of Canada touting its support for the WPS Agenda in fragile and conflict-affected states, while simultaneously supporting Saudi Arabia’s leading role in a conflict that has had deleterious impacts on women’s lives and gender equality. One account estimates that gender-based violence in Yemen has risen by 63% since the current iteration of the

55. Joan Eveline and Carol Bacchi, “What are we mainstreaming when we mainstream gender?” International Feminist Journal of Politics 7, no. 4 (2005): 496–512.
56. Cornwall, “Revisiting the gender agenda,” 76. Italics in original.
57. Global Affairs Canada, Canada’s Feminist International,” 58.
58. Mersiha Gadzo, “Canada lifts suspension of arms exports to Saudi Arabia,” Al Jazeera, 9 April 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/canada-lifts-freeze-arms-exports-saudi-arabia-200409193841254.html (accessed 6 May 2020).
conflict began in 2015. Pursuing a “feminist” foreign policy on the one hand while providing arms to a state with a disastrous track record on women’s rights domestically and in international conflicts undermines the potential to reach these goals and create lasting positive change.

**Conclusion**

While Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy has bolstered Canada’s image as a progressive, feminist global leader, the FIAP’s language and approach reflect some of the pervasive challenges that have persisted in wider development policy and practice and which hamper efforts toward gender equality. In this article, I have drawn upon the literature on gender and (in)security to demonstrate how three of these interrelated challenges are reflected in the FIAP and risk impeding its full potential to deliver transformative change. First, faulty and outdated assumptions on gender roles and constructions have formed a shaky foundation on which too many policies—including the FIAP—are built. In particular, a failure to recognize and rectify the essentialization of women and girls, and to a lesser extent boys and men, contribute to a narrow and instrumentalized application of gender and a “feminist” approach. Second, the conflation of gender equality with women’s empowerment is not only a careless discursive slip, it also has critical implications for how policies and practices are implemented. The work of feminist authors writing on conflict and post-conflict contexts has been particularly useful in demonstrating that simply promoting women’s participation in women’s empowerment programs does little to challenge the structural power inequalities that produce and reproduce patriarchal systems of discrimination. These systems need to be challenged if progress on gender equality is to be achieved. Third, I have discussed the distinct paradox of gender and gender equality being at once depoliticized and over-politicized, with similar outcomes of neutralizing their conceptual and practical applications and therefore inhibiting progress toward gender equality outcomes.

The linkages between the theoretical and conceptual foundation of the FIAP and real practical challenges are important to consider as the impact of the FIAP continues to evolve and be evaluated. While it may be tempting to dislocate a federal policy from its rhetorical roots, failing to do so risks replicating the mistakes that have been informed by unchecked assumptions and oversights in practical contexts. A feminist foreign policy that promotes transformative change through tackling unequal structures while promoting agency is required. While the FIAP may be a positive starting point, its potential to deliver such change in the face of these shortcomings is uncertain. Currently, as the world contends with the COVID-19 pandemic and begins to comprehend its impact on individuals and institutions, a truly feminist approach to foreign assistance will be required to redraw a new normal that does not perpetuate the same structures, assumptions, and instrumentalization that have entrenched gender inequality.

59. Brittany Lambert and Christine Martin, “Women, peace and security: Ending the Saudi arms deal,” Oxfam Canada, 2 October 2019, https://www.oxfam.ca/blog/ending-the-saudi-arms-deal/ (accessed 6 May 2020).
While this discussion has focused on these three major challenges, this list is certainly not exhaustive. The FIAP in its current state raises other significant issues that require further attention and research, including the important and pervasive challenge of adequately measuring gender equality outcomes that has not been sufficiently addressed, and the framing of men and boys. Other authors have pointed to the FIAP’s policy incoherence;\(^{60}\) the distinct lack of financial resources available to operationalize let alone achieve its stated goals,\(^{61}\) and the limitations of the donor-driven approach\(^{62}\) as major challenges. While the FIAP reflects at least a symbolic shift toward a more feminist approach to international assistance, these and the challenges outlined in this article demonstrate that the policy has been built on shaky ground that threatens the extent to which the FIAP is likely to deliver the transformational change required to achieve gender equality. The reflections and lessons learned from critical analyses of the FIAP, however, can also serve as useful considerations in the preparation of Canada’s White Paper and subsequent program development in Canada’s feminist foreign policy initiatives.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: The author is supported in part by funding by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC).

**ORCID iD**

Jessica Cadesky [https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9716-7277](https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9716-7277)

**Author Biography**

Jessica Cadesky is a PhD candidate at the School of International Development and Global Studies at the University of Ottawa.

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60. Hunter McGill and Stephen Brown, “What do Canada’s peers say about Canadian development cooperation?” *The McLeod Group*, 18 September 2018 [https://www.mcleodgroup.ca/2018/09/what-do-canadas-peers-say-about-canadian-development-cooperation/](https://www.mcleodgroup.ca/2018/09/what-do-canadas-peers-say-about-canadian-development-cooperation/) (accessed 16 September 2019)

61. Danielle Lee, *What is Feminist Foreign Policy? An Analysis of Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa, 2018) and Nobel Women’s Initiative and MATCH International Women’s Fund Written Submission for the Pre-Budget Consultations in Advance of the 2019 Budget: Realizing the Potential of the Feminist International Assistance Policy Through Investing in Women’s Rights Organizations and Feminist Movements 30 July 2018 [https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FINA/Brief/BRI0010329br-external/MATCHInternationalWomen%E2%80%99sFund-e.pdf](https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/FINA/Brief/BRI0010329br-external/MATCHInternationalWomen%E2%80%99sFund-e.pdf) (accessed 16 September 2019)

62. Stephen Brown and Liam Swiss, “Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy: Game changer or fig leaf?” In Katherine Graham and Allan M. Maslove, eds., *How Ottawa Spends: 2017-2018, Canada @ 150* (Ottawa: Carleton University School of Public Policy and Administration, 2017): 117–131.