Which feminism(s)? For whom? Intersectionality in Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy

Sam E. Morton  
Memorial University

Judyannet Muchiri  
Memorial University

Liam Swiss  
Memorial University

Abstract  
The Government of Canada introduced its new Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) to guide its foreign aid programming in June 2017. This feminist turn mirrors earlier adoptions of feminist aid and foreign policy by Sweden and echoes the current Canadian government’s feminist rhetoric. This paper examines the FIAP and its Action Areas Policies to ask what kind(s) of feminism are reflected in the policy and what groups of people it prioritizes. The paper examines the values, goals, and gaps of the policy in order to understand what feminist values and goals are being operationalized and pursued and what gaps and contradictions exist. By examining the FIAP’s Action Area Policies using a discourse network analysis of the groups represented in the policies, we demonstrate the failings of the FIAP to incorporate an intersectional approach. Our results show that the FIAP adopts a mainstream liberal feminism that excludes many peoples and groups from the core of Canada’s aid efforts.

Corresponding author: 
Liam Swiss, Memorial University, Department of Sociology, Arts & Administration Building, A4053, 230 Elizabeth Avenue, St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, A1C5S7, Canada.  
Email: lswiss@mun.ca
In June 2017, the Government of Canada released its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) to much applause. Several years and a federal election later, important questions and concerns remain regarding the feminist credentials of the policy, the lack of additional funding, its implementation, and overall responsibility for achieving the policy’s aims. In particular, the FIAP set the ambitious goal that 95% of Canadian development assistance will integrate gender by 2022. In this article we critically analyse the FIAP and its six Action Area Policies to explore (1) what kind(s) of feminism are reified in the policy and (2) which peoples and groups appear to matter most in the policy.

We begin by briefly sketching some of the background of Canada’s foreign policy, and the context of how women and gender have been addressed in development. Next, we turn our attention to examining the values, goals, and gaps of the policy in order to understand what feminist values and goals are being operationalized and pursued, and what gaps and contradictions exist. Then we use critical analysis, drawing on some of the tenets of discourse analysis, and undertake a discourse network mapping of the six Action Area Policies. Finally, we suggest factors the FIAP will need to address in order to evolve its approach to feminism and intersectionality as a means and ends of achieving international development assistance that is feminist.

**Background and context**

**The FIAP and Canada’s foreign policy**

In June 2017, Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy was released. As the first dedicated aid policy statement in more than a decade, this policy set an ambitious agenda to make gender equality and feminism the centre of Canada’s development assistance programming going forward. Echoing countries like Sweden, and more recently Mexico, the FIAP ostensibly takes steps toward Canada embracing a feminist foreign policy supportive of global pro-gender equality norms.¹ Yet, despite the centrality of gender equality as a Canadian value in foreign

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¹ Karin Aggestam and Jacqui True, “Gendering foreign policy: A comparative framework for analysis,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no. 2 (2020): 143–162.
policy debates for more than a decade, unlike Sweden and Mexico, Canada’s FIAP falls short of actually committing to a fully feminist foreign policy.

One area where this is apparent is in the context of spending. Whereas the FIAP arrived with no promised increases in budget allocation, the Canadian government has committed an additional C$14 billion over 10 years for the Canadian military. This is an increase of approximately 70%, bringing military spending to C$32.7 billion annually, or 1.4% of Gross Domestic Product. Comparatively, Canada is currently spending 0.26% of Gross National Income on official development assistance, far from the 0.7% development assistance target. Even with modest aid budget increases announced in the 2018 federal budget and announcements of new programs paid for with previously committed funds, the Canadian government has maintained the status quo of meagre aid spending despite the fanfare surrounding the release of the FIAP. Swiss labels this “miserly feminism,” underscoring the contradiction between avowing a strong feminist position but committing little to no new resources to undertake it. The significant increases in military spending, in contrast, demonstrate where the Canadian government is putting its money when it comes to foreign policy.

The FIAP focuses on six principal action areas, namely gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, human dignity, growth that works for everyone, environment and climate change action, inclusive governance, and peace and security. Gender equality and empowerment of women and girls is both a standalone commitment and a cross-cutting theme. The policy suggests that focusing Canada’s aid efforts on these six principal action areas will help achieve the FIAP’s stated goal to eradicate global poverty; however, as in previous iterations of Canadian aid policy, it remains to be seen whether these newly identified priorities will lead to meaningful change or will simply make feminist aid “the latest in a long list of flavors-of-the-month in Canada’s aid program over the past two decades.” Rather than being a transformational policy, the FIAP may instead represent “business as usual” for Canada’s aid policy. Notably, the implementation strategies for these action areas were not released publicly until more than 2 years after the creation of the FIAP, casting doubt on whether and how the initial implementation of the policy was guided—by a strategic feminist direction or on an ad hoc basis.

2. Alison Howell, “Peaceful, tolerant and orderly? A feminist analysis of discourses of ‘Canadian values’ in Canadian foreign policy,” Canadian Foreign Policy Journal 12, no. 1 (2005): 49–69.
3. Stephen Brown, “All about that base? Branding and the domestic politics of Canadian foreign aid,” Canadian Foreign Policy Journal 24, no. 2 (2018): 145–64; Rebecca Tiessen and Emma Swan, “Canada’s feminist foreign policy promises: An ambitious agenda for gender equality, human rights, peace, and security,” in Norman Hillmer and Philippe Lagassé, eds., Justin Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 187–205.
4. Liam Swiss, “Feminism on the cheap: Can Canada achieve its ambitious gender equality aid targets with no new money?,” Grow Research Bulletin, no. 5 (2018a): 3–5; Tiessen and Swan, “Canada’s Feminist Foreign Policy Promises,” 187–205.
5. Ibid., 5.
6. Brown, “All about that base?,” 158.
7. Laura Parisi, “Canada’s new Feminist International Assistance Policy: Business as usual?,” Foreign Policy Analysis 16, no. 2 (2020): 165.
Copycat Canada?

Canada has a reputation as one of the leading aid donors in the women, gender, and development field. Like all donors, however, it also often enacts policy by emulating other donors and adopting approaches promoted as global policy models by other international actors. In the case of the FIAP, Canada appears to owe significant inspiration to Sweden and its Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) launched in October 2014. Sweden’s FFP has been characterized as a policy inspired by the liberal feminist ethics of a “gender cosmopolitanism,” which reflects a pro-gender-equality internationalism in tandem with Sweden’s domestic identity as a “state feminist.” Yet, while countries like Sweden and Mexico apply feminist principles and ethics to their entire foreign policy, Canada has limited its feminist commitment to the aid sector, despite broader feminist rhetoric espoused in other aspects of the first Trudeau government since 2015.

Other donor countries in the Development Assistance Committee are also strong supporters of gender equality in their development assistance, but by early 2020, only Canada, France, and Sweden made a formal commitment to a feminist approach in this field. Mexico, a non-Development Assistance Committee country, is the only Latin American country to adopt an explicitly feminist foreign policy. Countries such as Ireland, Iceland, Belgium, and the Netherlands all report that more than 60% of their aid targeted gender equality in 2015–2016. While these countries may not have made the rhetorical commitment to feminism in a policy statement, it is clear there are several donors for whom gender equality is a core priority in their aid spending. What is less clear is the degree to which this gender-related spending can be considered similar or identical to what Canada and Sweden are labelling feminist aid, a matter which we explore later in this paper.

Values, goals, and gaps of the FIAP

In the history of feminism and feminist thought, one common thread stands out: an often-fruitful lack of consensus. The language of gender and gender equality has gained wide traction globally; however, feminism tends to retain its expressly political edge and transformative goals, thus remaining less palatable in the context of government policies. A close reading of Canada’s FIAP and its Action Area Policies shows that, for the federal government, women’s and girls’ economic and

8. Liam Swiss, The Globalization of Foreign Aid: Developing Consensus, Routledge Global Cooperation Series (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2018b).
9. Liam Swiss, “The adoption of women and gender as development assistance priorities: An event history analysis of world polity effects,” International Sociology 27, no. 1 (2012): 96–119.
10. Annika Bergman-Rosamond, “Swedish feminist foreign policy and ‘gender cosmopolitanism,’” Foreign Policy Analysis 16, no. 2 (2020): 217–235.
11. Tiessen and Swan, “Canada’s feminist foreign policy promises,” 187–205; Parisi, “Canada’s new Feminist International Assistance Policy,” 163–180.
12. OECD, “Aid to gender equality and women’s empowerment: An overview,” OECD DAC GenderNET, Paris, 2018, 1–12.
political participation are viewed as the key means and ends to women’s empower-
ment and gender equality more broadly.

The marriage of economics and women’s empowerment is often referred to as
“smart economics.”¹³ As exemplified in Plan International’s Because I am a girl
campaign, it is believed that investing in women and girls within itself generates
higher returns on development funds. The FIAP, particularly in its “growth that
works for everyone” action area, echoes this smart economics approach:
“Investing in women and girls is the right thing to do and the smart way to
reduce poverty and inequality.”¹⁴ Parisi labels this approach in the FIAP as
“Feminist Neoliberalism,” linking gender equality to economic growth.¹⁵ The
problem with this approach, as articulated by Sylvia Chant and Caroline
Sweetman, is the risk that, by adopting “economic-speak” and efficiency argu-
ments for strategic feminist aims, we risk recreating the very structural issues
that feminists, and gender and development, seek to trouble and transform.¹⁶
Instrumentalizing women’s rights and gender equality to achieve other aims, there-
fore, is not necessarily a feminist approach to development.

Besides instrumentalizing women and girls, the adoption of the term empower-
ment is problematic. A feminist policy, like the FIAP, needs to be cautious in its
use of empowerment in reference to women and girls in the Global South because
of the politics associated with the term. Empowerment has been co-opted by dif-
f erent organizations and movements in a way that limits what empowerment as an
approach in development can do.¹⁷ Although it is not our intent to go into a
detailed discussion about that co-optation in this paper, we focus on one key
problem associated with the empowerment discourse. Empowerment implies that
the person or groups in question have no power and that power has to come from
an outside source.¹⁸ As feminist thinkers emphasize, marginalized people already
have some forms of power, and therefore empowerment must come from power-
within, it has to be self-generated.¹⁹ In a women’s empowerment approach, it is

¹³. Sylvia Chant and Caroline Sweetman, “Fixing women or fixing the world? ‘Smart economics’,
efficiency approaches, and gender equality in development,” Gender & Development 20, no. 3 (2012):
517–529.
¹⁴. Global Affairs Canada, “Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy,” Global Affairs
Canada, Ottawa, 2017), 1.
¹⁵. Parisi, “Canada’s new Feminist International Assistance Policy,” 163–180.
¹⁶. Chant and Sweetman, “Fixing women or fixing the world?,” 517–529.
¹⁷. Mary Ellen Buckley, Beyond the Rhetoric of Empowerment: A Critical Analysis of Gender,
Participation and Empowerment (Halifax: Dalhousie University, 2000).
¹⁸. Elisabeth Porter, “Rethinking women’s empowerment,” Journal of Peacebuilding & Development 8,
no. 1 (2013): 1–14.
¹⁹. Naila Kabeer, “Gender-aware policy and planning: A social relations perspective,” in Mandy
MacDonald, ed., Gender Planning and Development Agencies (Oxford: Oxfam, 1994).
instructive, therefore, to focus on the power dynamics⁵⁰ to highlight the power that women already have and what that power enables them to do.⁶¹

The use of the term empowerment risks to imply that Canada, through the FIAP, will transfer power to the “powerless” and therefore “helpless” women and girls in the Global South. This is problematic because it infantilizes women and girls and only locates them in their “needs” rather than engaging them as whole persons with different forms of power, experiences, and needs that they would bring to the engagement with Canada during the implementation process. A decidedly feminist policy would acknowledge the people it engages within their totality rather than zeroing in on one aspect.

Economic and political participation of women are the core values that ground Canada’s FIAP, unlike the Swedish policy, for example, which articulates an ethical framework and is grounded in a human rights-based approach. Sweden’s foreign policy commits to feminist ethical principles that promote the rights of women and girls as human rights.²² However, a feminist ethical framework is not clearly articulated in the FIAP, arguably to its detriment. Feminist foreign policy generally, and the FIAP particularly, should be engaging in a normative ethical framework that problematizes, troubles, and seeks to transform constitutive gender binaries.²³ Similarly, the FIAP does not state how possible ethical dilemmas could be addressed during implementation. A feminist ethical framework would serve as a useful reference in the event of ethical issues. Such a framework should include Canada’s guiding ethic in its engagement with partner countries. A feminist ethical framework can also act as an accountability tool for Canada to monitor its actions.

Based on the values outlined above, through the FIAP, Canada aims to eradicate global poverty and achieve a more peaceful, inclusive, and prosperous world. To achieve these two ambitious goals, Canada singles out gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as the most effective means but does so in a fashion that privileges economic and political participation over other avenues to gender equality. Vague language, such as “growth that works for everyone,” means that the policy remains toothless even after the release of the Action Area Policies. Rhetorical nods to feminism are not insignificant; however, can a diluted,

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20. Nira Yuval-Davis, “Women, Ethnicity and Empowerment,” *Feminism & Psychology* 13, no. 3 (1994): 193–209.
21. June Lennie, “Troubling Empowerment: An Evaluation and Critique of a Feminist Action Research Project Involving Rural Women and Interactive Communication Technologies,” (Queensland University of Technology, 2001).
22. Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond, “Swedish feminist foreign policy in the making: Ethics, politics, and gender,” *Ethics and International Affairs* 30, no. 3 (2016): 323–334; Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond, “Re-politicising the gender-security nexus: Sweden’s feminist foreign policy,” *European Review of International Studies* 5, no. 3 (2018): 30–48; Karin Aggestam and Annika Bergman-Rosamond, “Feminist foreign policy 3.0: Advancing ethics and gender equality in global politics,” *SAIS Review of International Affairs* 39, no. 1 (2019): 37–48; Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman-Rosamond, and Annica Kronsell, “Theorising feminist foreign policy,” *International Relations* 33, no. 1 (2019): 23–39.
23. Aggestam, Bergman-Rosamond, and Kronsell, “Theorising feminist foreign policy,” 23–39.
politically palatable, taxidermy of feminism be considered “feminist” if it eschews intersectional analysis? While not undermining the significance of feminist foreign policy, we should nevertheless be critical of how we understand feminism within governments’ foreign policy. How can we understand the contradictions between what the FIAP espouses and what the Canadian government does in the realm of foreign affairs? In no way should we ignore the significant work and perseverance that has come before us in the history of feminism, women’s rights, and 2SLGBTQIA+ rights. However, we must balance acknowledging that the FIAP is a significant event in development assistance, in feminism, and in foreign policy with continuing to be critical. Critical perspectives on intersectionality in the FIAP are necessary.

**Gender essentialism and missing intersections**

Intersectionality has been erroneously conceptualized as a theoretical approach, the exclusive focus of which is the intersection of race and gender. This theoretical approach has, therefore, been critiqued for creating a categorical hegemony that privileges race, gender, and black women. Despite this critique, intersectionality is still central to the study of different social issues and has been widely adopted in different fields. It is an especially useful analytic tool in our reading of Canada’s FIAP.

Intersectionality, coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, is the recognition of multiple interlocking identities, defined by relative sociocultural power and privilege that shape people’s individual and collective identities and experiences. This approach enables a more nuanced analysis as it neither privileges one social category nor conceptualizes social categories in fixed and static ways. Presently, the FIAP appears to privilege gender as a social category while leaving out other social

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24. Columba Achilleos-Sarll, “Reconceptualising foreign policy as gendered, sexualised and racialised: Towards a postcolonial feminist foreign policy (analysis),” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 19, no. 1 (2018): 34–49.

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

26. Devon W. Carbado, “Colorblind intersectionality,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38, no. 4 (2013): 811–845.

27. Sumi Cho, “Post-intersectionality: The curious reception of intersectionality in legal scholarship,” *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 10, no. 2 (2013): 385–404.

28. Ibid.

29. Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, Article 8.

30. Achilleos-Sarll, “Reconceptualising Foreign Policy as Gendered, Sexualised and Racialised,” 34–49.
categories such as class, age, sexual orientation, and ability, despite the policy’s rhetorical claims to an intersectional approach. In the FIAP, gender equality primarily means equality for women and girls as monolithic categories. As Mary Hawkesworth notes, injustices are easily institutionalized in laws and entrenched in policies that grant rights and opportunities to some groups while excluding other groups from the same rights. A close read of Canada’s FIAP shows that gender equality tends to equate “gender” to equality for women and girls only. Equality for women and girls is important, but an intersectional feminist policy should extend equality to other groups that do not identify with the two dominant gender categories. For example, the policy alludes to members of the “LGBTQ2I” communities by stating that all people, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, must enjoy the same human rights but fails to outline how Canada intends to address the specific challenges these groups face as well as how it will advocate for their equal rights. Likewise, “LGBTQ2I” groups are only mentioned in three of the six Action Area Policies, and in an equally cursory fashion. By omitting 2SLGBTQIA+ groups, while members of 2SLGBTQIA+ communities continue to live in precarious situations, Canada sends a message that it is concerned about equality, but not equally across demographics.

Taking an intersectional feminist approach entails examining multiple and overlapping inequalities which disadvantage various groups within society. As with the relative silence within the policy on 2SLGBTQIA+ groups, the FIAP also does not clearly identify how Canadian aid might work to address inequalities experienced by people with disabilities; the elderly; youth; and lower-caste, lower-class, or other marginalized groups in the context of gender inequalities. In this respect, the FIAP is divorced from intersectional feminism. This silence carries into the six Action Area Policies, where such groups and markers of intersectional identities feature minimally, and mostly in passing.

Intersectionality presents a methodological challenge to organizations seeking to adopt this approach in their work. One must choose a method, a level of analysis, and the principles that determine the choices made. This complexity has been a matter of concern to implementers and critics alike. Thus, we anticipate that, in an attempt to be more intersectional, Canada would face certain challenges.
during implementation. To begin, social categories that reflect and (re)produce constantly evolving, interlocking identities require a more nuanced power analysis. Power responds to interlocking identities in different ways; therefore, power mapping is essential to identify and articulate the resulting structural subordination experienced by different groups of people that the FIAP intends to serve. That is, Canada needs to interrogate how power operates for marginalized people with overlapping, subordinated social categorizations, and it must clearly outline how the FIAP will serve these groups of people. This contextual analysis needs to go beyond intersectional categories to look at the broader social landscape of power and hierarchy\(^{37}\) and, arguably, do more to connect Canada’s feminist foreign policy to domestic policies also working to transform the status quo.\(^{38}\) Given past challenges of Canadian foreign policy taking seriously these social inequalities in its power relations at home and abroad,\(^{39}\) the prospects for making the FIAP functionally intersectional seem bleak.

There are difficulties that limit how well a government can integrate intersectionality in policy. Intersectionality in public policy recognizes that different approaches are needed to address complex inequalities;\(^{40}\) as such, to eradicate global poverty as the FIAP seeks to do, Canada needs a comprehensive approach that takes all factors contributing to poverty into account. The main problem in integrating intersectionality in policymaking is the lack of effective methods to do so.\(^{41}\) As a result, some policy-makers resort to one-dimensional approaches such as gender mainstreaming.\(^{42}\) The very form of nation-state foreign policy seems to hinder an intersectional approach because it struggles to reflect the complexity and relational character of social position and gendered oppression. In the FIAP, Canada has attempted to move toward a multi-dimensional approach by focusing its efforts on six action areas that will in totality eradicate global poverty and lead to a more peaceful world. However, by adopting a narrow approach to gender equality—a monolithic women and girls’ empowerment—as the primary means toward eradicating poverty, Canada fails to integrate intersectionality in either the FIAP or its Action Area Policies/implementation plans.\(^{43}\) Such a one-dimensional approach cannot effectively address a complex issue such as global poverty in its intersectional forms.

\(^{37}\) Anthias, “Intersectional what?,” 3–19.
\(^{38}\) Achilleos-Sarll, “Reconceptualising foreign policy as gendered, sexualised and racialised,” 34–49.
\(^{39}\) Howell, “Peaceful, tolerant and orderly?,” 49–69.
\(^{40}\) Olena Hankivsky, “Gender vs. diversity mainstreaming: A preliminary examination of the role and transformative potential of feminist theory,” Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique 38, no. 4 (2005): 977–1001; Olena Hankivsky and Renee Cormier, “Intersectionality and public policy: Some lessons from existing models,” Political Research Quarterly 64, no. 1 (2011): 217–229.
\(^{41}\) Ange-Marie Hancock, “When multiplication doesn’t equal quick addition: Examining intersectionality as a research paradigm,” Perspectives on Politics 5, no. 1 (2007): 63–79.
\(^{42}\) Hankivsky and Cormier, “Intersectionality and public policy,” 217–229.
\(^{43}\) Mason, “Buzzwords and fuzzwords,” 203–219; Parisi, “Canada’s new Feminist International Assistance Policy,” 163–180.
Implementing intersectionality?

**Implementation plan(s)**

It is important to evaluate a policy not only in terms of the needs that the policy meets but also in the ways that policy empowers or disempowers people. In this section, we focus on the different ways that Canada plans to actualize the goals in the policy and the gaps in the action areas plans to foreshadow potential harmful outcomes of the policy.

Canada includes some information on how it plans to implement the policy; for example, by working with local women’s organizations in innovative ways to advance women’s rights, by challenging harmful norms and practices, and by empowering women to take part in economic growth. The FIAP establishes the Women’s Voice and Leadership Initiative, consisting of a pot of C$150 million to support local women’s organizations globally. However, the policy fails to outline concrete implementation details for those funds.

Beyond the policy and its related action area strategies, how well the policy is implemented depends on factors such as the context, value system, and institutions in the countries that Canada partners with internationally. To start, Canada plans to work more closely with governments in recipient countries to change their policies. The FIAP and its Action Area Policies fail, however, to address how Canada will deal with cases where a change in policy is not enough to change attitudes; for example, where gender inequality challenges are deeply rooted in cultures and traditions. Effective institutions are needed to enforce policy in such cultures and traditions because institutional capacity affects policy regardless of political actors. This is especially important in countries experiencing political conflicts.

Similarly, the FIAP does not articulate how Canada aims to respond to situations where countries are categorically opposed to feminism and human rights, or even where countries have different approaches to feminism, such as the 2018 expulsion of the Canadian ambassador to Saudi Arabia after the Canadian minister of foreign affairs tweeted that the Kingdom should release activist prisoners. Policy exists within a specific context; the context in the countries that Canada engages with will shape how the policy translates into practice. Further, context also affects what state actors prioritize; potential conflicts are likely to arise in cases where state actors in recipient countries prioritize differently than what Canada’s feminist aid policy stipulates.

Besides context, priorities are also shaped by the value systems in a given country. The feminist policy is clear on gender equality and economic empowerment of

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44. Martha A. Ackelsberg, “Feminist analyses of public policy” *Comparative Politics* 24, no. 4 (1992): 477–493.
45. Mala Htun and S. Laurel Weldon, “When do governments promote women’s rights? A framework for the comparative analysis of sex equality policy,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8, no. 1 (2010): 207–216.
46. Ibid., 207–216.
women and girls as core values; however, these values might not match other countries’ values. Moreover, within countries there is a plurality of values; would Canada’s aid programming align itself with the values of the nation states’ government, or with local women’s groups? Given this situation, Canada needs to have a strategy, which is missing in the policy as it is. In the event of different value systems with partner countries, Canada needs to first consider the socio-economic and cultural contexts that shape different countries’ value systems. Understanding these contextual factors can enable Canada to deal with emerging tensions while implementing the FIAP. Rather than adopt a dismissive approach in response to countries where feminism is conceptualized differently, Canada can work with local stakeholders to arrive at a consensus that fosters a working environment for the FIAP to thrive. Further, a dialogue between Canada and partner countries regarding feminism is needed: a conversation about feminist values and practices across countries. That conversation would help tease out shared values, multiple understandings of feminism, differences, and how to proceed forward in mutual respect.

**Intersectionality in the FIAP Action Area Policies**

Though not fully engaging in the methodologies of discourse analysis, we share some of the concerns and commitments of critical discourse analysis,\(^47\) critical policy analysis,\(^48\) and feminist policy analysis.\(^49\) Specifically, we hold that policy documents are not neutral. The FIAP is not a mere reflection of the world. Rather, it is productive; it (re)produces a version of the world. The study of feminist foreign policies will benefit from more thorough discourse analysis; however, that is out of the scope of this article.

The FIAP presents a particular vision of women and girls that can marginalize those who do not subscribe to this vision. As we argue, particularly in terms of new funding, the FIAP lacks teeth. However, this feminist foreign policy is part of a wider discourse and that has force and effect. For example, the FIAP, as the foremost mediating policy document of Canadian aid, affects how international NGOs and aid recipients frame the problems and solutions of their projects. The FIAP risks to reify that women and girls are valuable to development interventions only in so far as they are brought further into the domains of neoliberal economic and representational political participation. We thus must ask, “what about the bad girls?”\(^50\) What about the women who are incarcerated, sex working, trans,

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47. Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003); Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, 2nd ed. (London; Thousand Oaks [Calif.]: SAGE, 2009).

48. Norman Fairclough, “Critical discourse analysis and critical policy studies,” *Critical Policy Studies* 7, no. 2 (2013): 177–197; Catherine Marshall, “Researching the margins: Feminist critical policy analysis,” *Educational Policy* 13, no. 1 (1999): 59–76.

49. Heather Kanenberg, Roberta Leal, and Stephen “Arch” Erich, “Revising McPhail’s feminist policy analysis framework,” *Advances in Social Work* 19, no. 1 (2019): 1–22; Amy G. Mazur, “Toward the systematic study of feminist policy in practice: An essential first step,” *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* 38, no. 1 (2017): 64–83; Beverly A. McPhail, “A feminist policy analysis framework: Through a gendered lens,” *The Social Policy Journal* 2, no. 2–3 (2003): 39–61.
and/or drug-using? What about the women who are absent from this policy? Below, we take a discourse network analysis approach to show the actors that are textually present in the FIAP.

To assess the extent to which the FIAP Action Area Policies reflect intersectionality, we undertook a discourse network analysis of the six Action Area Policies of the FIAP. Discourse network analysis applies social network analysis techniques to political actors and policy themes to empirically examine policy debates.51 We employ what Philip Leifeld describes as a descriptive network model to identify the key groups of persons implicated in the FIAP.52 By treating the FIAP Action Area Policies as one category of nodes, and the groups included in the policies as the other set of nodes, we reveal the concordance/dissonance of the Action Area Policies in terms of who matters in the FIAP. To evaluate the question of who matters in the FIAP, we completed a close reading of each Action Area Policy. We first identified the different groups and categories of persons and organizations mentioned in each policy as an exercise. We then coded 88 primary categories of people and organizations that appeared across the six Action Area Policy documents and counted the frequency with which they appeared, totalling 1,332 mentions of any such groups in the documents. To map the relative importance of each code, we next created discourse network diagrams that detail which coded group/persons appear in each Action Area Policy. In Figures 1–3 below, Action Area Policies are represented by light blue squares, and the coded categories are dark blue circles. Nodes in each diagram are sized by the number of ties they have; larger nodes for the coded categories mean that they appear in a greater number of the Action Area Policies. The ties between each node are sized by the number of mentions of that category in the respective Action Area Policy; a thick line means the code was mentioned numerous times, while the thinnest line reflects likely a single mention.

Figure 1 reveals the variety and unevenness of the Action Area Policies inclusion of different people, groups, and organizations. While 88 different codes are reflected and the mean number of mentions of a single category within any Action Area Policy is just over 7, the median number of mentions, 2, is much lower. This means that, while the Action Area Policies reflect a diverse set of groups and organizations, they tend to mention each coded group in a very limited fashion. For example, whereas the category “women” appears 318 times across the six policies, the category “people with disabilities” appears just five times in only three of the six policies.

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50. Heather Jarvis, “In praise of bad girls –The rise of SlutWalk,” (paper presented at Women Deliver 2019 Conference, Vancouver, Canada, June 6, 2019), https://wd2019.org/playlist/virtual-conference-archive/.
51. Philip Leifeld, “Discourse network analysis: Policy debates as dynamic networks,” in Jennifer Nicoll Victor, Alexander H. Montgomery, Mark Lubell, eds., The Oxford Handbook of Political Networks, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 301–325.
52. Leifeld, “Discourse network analysis,” 301–325.
**Figure 1.** Discourse network diagram: All groups mentioned in FIAP Action Area Policies. Source: Authors’ coding of FIAP Action Area Policy Documents.
To better understand the character of the feminism reflected in the six Action Area Policies, we isolated only those categories of persons and organizations which appear in all of the FIAP Action Areas. Figure 2 shows this limited selection. With only seven such common codes (women; girls; women’s organizations; children and youth; the poor and most marginalized; families; and Canada), it is clear that the core of the Action Area Policies reflects a mainstream liberal feminism focused on women as a largely homogenous category. The focus on the “poor and most marginalized” appears to be a common branding across the action areas to emphasize a group of the worst off in society in each case. Apart from the focus on children and youth as an indicator of the diversity of women by age, there is little in this common core to indicate a differentiated or intersectional approach to implementing the FIAP.

Taking the analysis of intersectionality further, we identified which coded categories or groups of people might indicate an increased awareness of intersectional feminism in the FIAP and its Action Area Policies. Here, we looked for codes which indicated a critical lens on identity markers, which might lead to different inequalities as they intersect with sex/gender as a category. Eight such codes were present in the data, indicating intersectional thinking about sexuality, race, ability, age, indigeneity, and citizenship/security status. What is clear from Figure 3 is that these more intersectional categories feature in very few of the Action Area Policies, and in a very limited fashion. Only the category “children
and youth” appears in all the action areas, and indicates the FIAP’s bias when it comes to examining age as an intersectional category; the elderly do not feature at all in any of the FIAP action area documents. Gender and sexual minorities (2SLGBTQIA+ and non-binary people) feature in only three of the action areas, with non-binary persons only addressed in the Gender Equality Action Area via a single mention.

While a discourse network analysis that counts and maps the categories of people and organizations which matter in the FIAP Action Area policies is a blunt instrument to take stock of the type of feminism(s) reflected in the policy, this exercise illustrates the clear lack of intersectional analysis underpinning the Action Area Policies which are meant to guide the FIAP’s implementation, echoing findings from prior research.53

**Ways forward?**

For the FIAP to embrace a more intersectional feminism, Canada needs to take a few considerations into account. The following factors address the existing gaps in

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53. Mason, “Buzzwords and fuzzwords,” 203–219; Parisi, “Canada’s new Feminist International Assistance Policy,” 163–180.
the FIAP and are potential practices that will enhance Canada’s feminist international assistance agenda. Four elements are key: (1) Working with transnational feminist networks; (2) embracing multiple feminisms; (3) establishing principles for partnership with women’s organizations; and (4) avoiding paternalism.

**Transnational feminist networks**

For the FIAP to avoid being perceived as only a top-down Western liberal feminist policy, Canada needs to work with transnational feminists and networks. David Duriesmith argues that states must ally with and support such networks to escape their masculinist/patriarchal pasts. As such, Canada must support a robust feminist civil society in Canada and in the countries Canada works with for development. These feminist networks are important both for partnering with Canada to meet FIAP goals and as accountability for partners. A robust feminist civil society in Canada and recipient countries keeps Canada in check and ensures it delivers and does so in a more intersectional manner, cognisant of the multiple and overlapping inequalities experienced by people. This relationship with feminist networks is specifically important in situations where state actors and institutions are categorically opposed to feminist values. A relationship with feminist networks need not jeopardize the working environment that feminists have built and continue to build in such countries; rather, it can foster a partnership based on mutual respect and reciprocity. Through this engagement, Canada can meet its goals while expanding spaces for feminist networks to engage in their advocacy.

**Multiple feminisms**

Closely related to working with feminist networks, Canada also needs to embrace, and have a how-to-navigate strategy for, multiple feminisms within implementing countries. With different feminist agendas in different countries and even different feminist agendas within the same country, Canada has to engage with partner countries in the context of these multiple feminisms, perhaps following the lead of countries like South Africa, which have been more successful at integrating post-colonial or “Third-World” feminisms into their foreign policies. To embrace multiple feminisms, Canada must acknowledge, as Chandra Mohanty suggests, the different ways in which feminist struggles are experienced locally and how feminist

54. David Duriesmith, “Manly states and feminist foreign policy: Revisiting the liberal state as an agent of change,” in Swati Parasha, J. Ann Tickner, and Jacqui True, eds., *Revisiting Gendered States: Feminist Imaginings of the State in International Relations*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 51–68.

55. Johanna Brenner, “Transnational feminism and the struggle for global justice,” *New Politics* 9, no. 2 (2003): 78.

56. Toni Haastrup, “Gendering South Africa’s foreign policy: Toward a feminist approach?,” *Foreign Policy Analysis* 16, no. 2 (2020): 199–216.
struggles are experienced by different groups in society (e.g., racial minorities, sexual minorities, age interest groups). These struggles shape what different feminist actors prioritize in their activities, which means that some issues outlined in the FIAP might not be of immediate concern to some feminist networks and, similarly, some feminist approaches might not be recognized as such by the Canadian aid community.

**Partnership with women’s movement groups**

Women’s movements and organizations feature as an important part in the policy and its action areas; Canada intends to work with partners on new and innovative ways to engage with local women’s organizations. To do this, it is important to ensure that women’s organizations are not co-opted and that the variety of different women’s organizations is included. Given the socio-economic context in which some of those women’s organizations work and the rights they advocate for, working with them requires Canada to consider how such a partnership will advance women’s organizations’ causes, as well as how it can potentially harm them. The unintended consequences of supporting local women’s movements must be duly considered, as must the potential harms of privileging one movement group over another. This is why it is imperative for Canada to have an action plan that includes a set of principles governing partnerships with women’s organizations.

It is also important to include in that action plan factors used to determine which women’s organizations Canada works with besides those organizations supporting women’s rights. The composition and locality of the women’s organizations matter because not all women are able to join and participate in local organizations’ activities. In some countries, women’s organizations have been co-opted by or created by authoritarian governments, and independent activism for women’s rights is marginalized. Participation in collective action depends on such factors as the income activities women are involved in, ethnic/racial status, age, religious identity, as well as social networks. With this understanding, Canada needs to decide whether to participate in partnerships that may alleviate poverty overall but exclude some women and may be contrary to building a more intersectional FIAP. At the same time, Canada should avoid working solely with elite women’s groups, which might exclude groups of women experiencing some of the worst inequalities in society. According to Weinberger and Jütting, donors such as

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57. Chandra Mohanty, “‘Under Western eyes’ revisited: Feminist solidarity through anticapitalist struggles,” *Signs* 28, no. 2 (2003): 499–535.

58. John Clark, “The state, popular participation, and the voluntary sector,” *World Development* 23, no. 4 (1995): 593–601; Katinka Weinberger and Johannes Jütting, “Women’s participation in local organizations: Conditions and constraints,” *World Development* 29, no. 8 (2001): 1391–1404.

59. Jessica Leigh Doyle, “Government co-option of civil society: Exploring the AKP’s role within Turkish women’s CSOs,” *Democratization* 25, no. 3 (2018): 445–463; Richa Nagar and Saraswati Raju, “Women, NGOs and the contradictions of empowerment and disempowerment: A conversation,” *Antipode* 35, no. 1 (2003): 1–13; Janet G. Townsend, Gina Porter, and Emma Mawdsley, “Creating spaces of resistance: Development NGOs and their clients in Ghana, India and Mexico,” *Antipode* 36, no. 5 (2004): 871–889.
Canada need to be aware that such a participation approach might not be the most effective or, in Canada’s case, not the most feminist.  

**Avoiding paternalism**

Canada needs to interrogate the ground it stands on. A progressive policy is important but more important is a policy that is implemented according to its provisions. This means a change in Canada’s attitude toward the people in the South that it works with. For example, there are paternalistic undertones in the policy: Canada wants to “help” Afghan women assert their rights;61 empower women to be “full” participants of economic life, assuming that women in the Global South are not already involved in economic activities;62 and “help” women learn how their regions’ political systems work.63 These examples indicate Canada’s desire to instruct women in the South as a way to make them “empowered.” Investing in programs that expand women’s spaces to participate in elective office, for example, is a positive approach as it is. However, taking the “help” approach while working with women in the South assumes that women are helpless victims rather than people with some degree of agency and capacity.  

In sum, to realize a more peaceful and prosperous world without acute levels of poverty through the FIAP, Canada needs to build diverse and inclusive alliances with other organizations that are feminist in composition and in their approach to social justice issues. Particularly, it is important to seek out transnational feminist networks reflecting a multiplicity of feminisms to better understand the politics associated with doing fundamentally feminist work and to build partnerships in existing and new projects. Further, by avoiding a paternalistic approach Canada can embrace multiple feminisms across cultures. To understand and accommodate different ways of conceptualizing feminisms makes possible respectful partnerships in achieving the goals of the FIAP. It is also equally important for Canada to establish principles that guide ethical partnerships with women’s organizations to prevent co-optation and promote an ethic of care.  

**Conclusion: Which feminism(s) and for whom?**

The aim of this study was to examine what type of feminism was reflected in Canada’s FIAP, and which groups of people appear to matter most in the policy and its action area statements. The way we talk about gender matters, and there are many welcome rhetorical nods to gender equality, feminism, and

60. Weinberger and Jütting, “Women’s participation in local organizations,” 139–140
61. Global Affairs Canada, “Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy,” 20.
62. Ibid., 35.
63. Ibid., 55.
64. Naila Kabeer, “Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women’s empowerment,” *Development and Change* 30, no. 3 (1999): 435–464.
65. Graeme Chesters, “Social movements and the ethics of knowledge production,” *Social Movement Studies* 11, no. 2 (2012): 145–160.
(briefly) to the intersectional nature of identity and oppression in the FIAP. Still, feminism should be understood as a plurality: feminisms. The questions become: whose feminism is being represented in the FIAP? Is the policy anti-racist? Intersectional? How will the policy work for people with disabilities? How are 2SLGBTQIA+ communities—in all their diversity—seen in the policy?

Arguably, the policy locates the problem of and solution to poverty within the purview of the world’s poor in developing countries, and, in particular, with women and girls. Chrystia Freeland, Canada’s former minister of foreign affairs, states that Canadians have the opportunity to help the world’s developing countries join the global middle class. Implicit in this goal is the contradiction of joining a global middle class that is dependent on cheap labour and cheap goods that are largely supplied by the world’s poor. The policy advances an individualistic liberal feminism that prioritizes economic and political participation. It is an aspirational document that seeks to advance a slightly more equitable status quo, but not fundamentally transform it.

Canada’s FIAP represents positive progress in explicitly addressing feminism and gender inequalities in development and has been widely lauded within Canada’s development assistance communities. Even after several years of implementation and the release of the six Action Area Policy statements, details surrounding how it is implemented and how it aligns with the other branches of Canada’s foreign policy, remain obscure. If the point of the FIAP is to substantively improve the lives of women, girls, boys, men, and non-binary people, then we need to analyze not only what the policy says but also what it can do in practice, and for whom. Future research on the impact of the FIAP will need to take up these questions by examining how Canadian aid recipients and partners either help deliver on the policy or find themselves marginalized by it.

A national aid policy like this cannot be intersectionally feminist if it misunderstands feminism and makes static what should always be in process. Feminism and empowerment are not states of being that can be achieved. More than an identity or identifier, it is a practice; a process of recognizing inequalities in order to dismantle and transform them. Strikingly, the policy uses the word feminism as if it is a collectively understood and agreed upon term, rather than critically questioning it and demonstrating a clear understanding of its complexities. In this way, the policy ends up excluding and silencing groups that do not neatly fit into its aims to bring women and girls into the “global middle class.”

Finally, can a policy be truly feminist if it is simply cordoned off to one section of the government’s foreign policy? The essentialism of women and girls in the FIAP suggests that “the leadership of women sparks reforms that benefit everyone,” but if these reforms are not also reflected in trade, diplomacy, migration, and defence policies, are these benefits really a priority to Canada or little more than a thin veneer of feminism over a status-quo foreign policy.

66. Global Affairs Canada, “Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy,” 8, 49.
67. Ibid., i.
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ORCID iD
Liam Swiss https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0681-0464

Author Biographies
Authors contributed equally and are listed in alphabetical order.

Sam E. Morton is an MA Candidate in Sociology at Memorial University.

Judyannet Muchiri is a PhD Candidate in Sociology at Memorial University.

Liam Swiss is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Memorial University.