

# Gender-Responsive Migration Governance in Canadian Feminist Foreign Policy

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## Issue

Despite widespread recognition of the feminization of migration, migration governance tends to be gender-blind, leaving gender inequality and women's rights unaddressed. Canada has yet to adequately engage with migration through its current feminist foreign policy (FFP) or commitments to the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

## Background

The feminization of migration is a conceptual term meant to engage with gender in global migration trends. It highlights women as autonomous economic migrants moving as the head of their own households rather than secondary members (Piper 2023). Currently, women make up approximately 49 percent of international labour migrants (UN Population Division 2020). It is important to understand the gendered experiences of migrants, particularly migrant women, as gender discrimination can make migrants more vulnerable to violence and precarity at all stages of their migrant journeys (International Organization for Migration 2023).

The GCM and the SDGs are a roadmap for utilizing migration's full potential and resolving displacement crises, particularly through a gender lens. The Expert Working Group for Addressing Women's Human Rights in the GCM has ensured that all 23 of the GCM's objectives can fulfill their obligations for gender-responsivity, particularly to address the rising feminization of migration (UN Women 2021). The SDGs are a cross-

categorical framework for gender-responsive migration governance, particularly noting five indicators for gender equality, eight for decent work and economic growth, four for quality education and 10 for reduced inequality — which directly mentions reduced inequality for migrants (Global Migration Data Analysis Centre [GMDAC] 2024). Despite the international adoption of the GCM and SDGs, only 23 percent of countries have incorporated a gender perspective into their national migration strategies or feminist foreign policies (GMDAC 2024). Other rising trends in migration, such as increased border securitization and increased gender-based violence (GBV), continue to threaten gender equality for migrants (Baldwin and Hynes 2022).

## Canadian Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) Framework

Globally, Canada was the second state to adopt a FFP (Global Affairs Canada [GAC] 2017). Canada's Feminist International Assistance Program (FIAP) is an international development-based policy meant to target gender equality and women's empowerment across several sectors, such as human dignity, economic growth, climate action, inclusive governance, and peace and security (ibid.). Canada also employs a gender mainstreaming approach to all policy areas, including migration, through the Gender-Based Analysis Plus (GBA+) initiative (ibid.). GBA+ is an analytical tool employed across government departments to ensure inclusive and responsive policies through intersectional analysis (Women and Gender Equality Canada Canada 2024). Despite not having a migration focus in our FFP, Canada has made progress in implementing some gender-conscious initiatives.

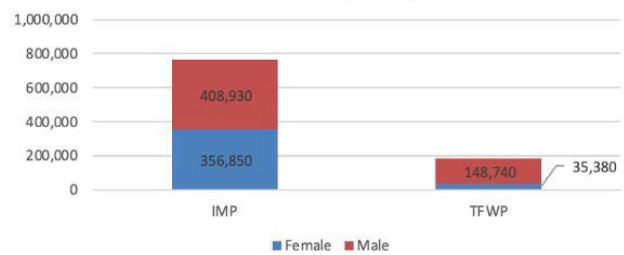
- The Assistance to Women at Risk Program provides resettlement opportunities and pathways for women in unstable migration situations or the protection of a family unit (GAC 2021).
- The former Racialized Newcomer Women Pilot supported economic settlement and integration in Canada (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada [IRCC] 2023a).
- The Sex and Gender Client Identifier Policy allows migrants to be listed as Gender X, creating a more inclusive and robust GBA+ approach to migrant information collection (ibid. 2021).

However, despite some progress in gender-responsive migration programming, Canada still falls short of addressing the experiences of most migrant women, particularly migrant women workers. The IRCC continues to dedicate itself to GBA+ by collecting gender-disaggregated migration data to ensure more equitable migration pathways (ibid. 2023a). However, Canada must remember to address migration as both a foreign and domestic policy issue, as even domestic migration programming has international implications.

## Gendering Economic Migration in Canada

Economic migration through temporary and permanent pathways was Canada's largest immigration source in 2022, with 604,382 migrants admitted on temporary work permits and 255,660 new permanent residents (PR) admitted through economic pathways, making up the largest source of PR applicants in 2022 at 58.4 percent (ibid. 2023b). Considering the IRCC's 2022-2023 Parliamentary Report, only 43.4 percent of economic principal applicants admitted for PR were women, but women make up over 52 percent of dependent applicants (ibid.). Focusing more specifically on Canada's Express Entry programs — the Canadian Experience Class, Federal Skilled Worker Program and the Federal Skilled Trades Program — these three programs accounted for 70,176 of Canada's PR admissions in 2022; however, only 18,896 or 26.9 percent of these programs accepted principal women applicants for PR (ibid. 2023b; 2023c). Despite the international increase in women's autonomous economic migration, women are underrepresented as principal admittees for PR through economic migration pathways in Canada. This leaves migrant women potentially vulnerable as their PR status, which provides legal recognition and access to social services, is likely being determined by their partner's status, giving less attention to their unique gendered needs (Goldring and Landolt 2011; Canadian Council for Refugees 2019).

Figure 1: Temporary Foreign Worker Program and International Mobility Program by Gender, 2023



Source: Graph created by Hannah Bacon, from data sourced from IRCC Open Data Canada 2023.

Temporary work permits are granted through Canada's Temporary Foreign Workers Program and International Mobility Program (Kachulis and Perez-Leclerc, 2020). However, both programs have severe gendered gaps, as seen in Figure 1. Temporary status programs are often associated with increased legal precarity, vulnerability to economic exploitation and limited mobility. In line with GBA+ recommendations, the IRCC has issued an Open Work Permit for Vulnerable Workers (OWP-V) program to assist temporary workers in leaving abusive working conditions without compromising their status, particularly highlighting gender-based abuses (IRCC 2023a). However, out of 750 issued OWP-Vs in 2022, only 204 went to women despite their increased risk of exploitation (ibid. 2023d).

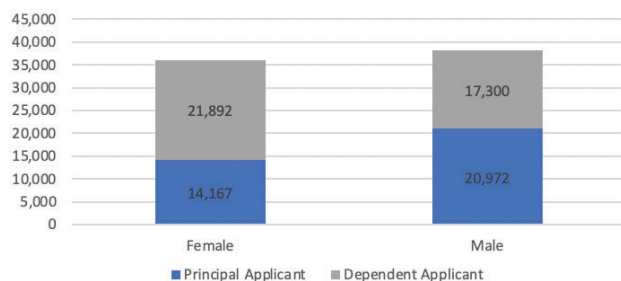
Regional data has shown an even larger gender divide. Sixty percent of the Provincial Nominee Program (PNP) admissions were male. Similar numbers were found in further regional programming (ibid.). The PNP addresses provincial labour shortages in Canadian health care, transportation and agriculture sectors. Of these three industries, women were only overrepresented in health care, with 74.74 percent female applicants (ibid.). Canada has recognized the feminization of migration within the care sector through programs such as The Home Child Care Provider Pilot and Home Support Worker Pilot. However, it is essential that Canada addresses women worker migrants' needs outside of traditionally feminine work sectors and encourages diverse gender participation within these sectors (UN Women and International Labour Organization (ILO) 2022).

## Gendering Refugees and Resettlement Initiatives

Gender-based and sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression and sex characteristics persecution are grounds for refugee protection in Canada, giving those

fleeing GBV and persecution a safe destination (IRCC 2023d). In 2021, the IRCC collaborated with civil society on the GBV Settlement Sector Strategy Project to strengthen the IRCC settlement staff's response to GBV (ibid. 2023b). The IRCC continues to commit itself to LGBTQ+ diversity through the Rainbow Refugee Partnership, which has admitted 40 LGBTQ+ refugees in 2022. They will expand the program by 150 spots over the next two years (ibid.). As previously mentioned, Canada has made some progress in providing gender-specific programming for integration and resettlement through The Assistance to Women at Risk Program, which resettled over 2,000 vulnerable refugee women and children in 2022 (ibid.). Although these specific initiatives speak to Canada's commitment to intersectionality and gender-responsivity, larger trends in Canadian refugee and asylum pathways highlight possible discrepancies. Only 19 percent of principal refugee applicants admitted for PR in 2022 were women, as shown in Figure 2 (ibid.).

Figure 2: Refugees and Protected Persons In-Canada by Gender, 2022



Source: Graph created by Hannah Bacon, from data sourced from IRCC's 2023 Annual Report to Parliament on Immigration p. 62.

Despite Canadian law dictating that all claims (principal or dependent) are individually assessed, women's underrepresentation of principal claimants for refugee status in Canada could increase barriers to understanding the experiences of refugee women and girls (Canadian Council for Refugees 2019).

## Recommendations

**Looking to our FFP+ partners:** Canada should take inspiration from other FFP+ Group member initiatives to address gender and migration in our implementation of the SDGs and GCM (GAC 2023). Highlighting Germany, the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development employs UN Women's Making Migration Safe for Women program in their existing FFP. Utilizing its developmental partnerships with Ethiopia and Nigeria, Germany is working to increase women's options for

safe, regular and orderly migration. Through the Shaping Development-oriented Migration Program, Germany is increasing migrant women's meaningful participation in international development projects based on their own lived experiences (Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development 2023).

### Fostering Collaboration Gender-Responsive and Development-Conscious Migration Strategies:

Our current FFP should work to address the relevant connections between gender, migration and development as supported by Canada's commitment to the SDGs. Canada should expand existing FIAP initiatives to address development-related migration trends and aid migrant women and girls in our partner states (Atak, Linley-Moore and Kim 2023). This collaboration should encourage an intersectional and human-rights-based approach to Canadian FFP, in line with Canada's Auditor General recommendations for GAC and the IRCC's own Anti-Racism Strategy and GBA+ initiatives (Auditor General of Canada 2023; IRCC 2023b).

### Increasing Regular Pathways, Protections and Principal Candidacy for Women Migrants:

Globally, women have fewer options for regular migration, but irregular routes increase the risk of migrant women experiencing violence, trafficking and exploitation (ILO 2021). Canada should increase opportunities for women to be recognized as principal refugee claimants or economic applicants. Canada must ensure that the assessment criteria for programs account for gendered biases in education, work history, language and domestic/familial responsibilities as per their obligations to GBA+ (IRCC 2023d). In cases where women do appear as dependent applicants, Canada must ensure an equal collection of data, and support for their migration experiences. Increasing opportunities for women's principal candidacy fits with larger global trends of the rising feminization of migration (Piper 2023). Economic pathways should encourage gender diversity in specific industries, particularly noting women migrants' underrepresentation in agriculture and transportation and men migrants' underrepresentation in care sectors (Storm and Lowndes 2019; Gabriel and MacDonald 2019). The IRCC should work closely with Canada's Strategy to Prevent and Address Gender-Based Violence to extend existing protections toward temporary migrant workers who already experience an increased workplace violence risk (IRCC 2023b).

**Strengthening Gender-Responsive and Intersectional Data Collection, Monitoring and Evaluation:** Making gender-disaggregated data more accessible encourages

collaborative and evidence-based policy making as per GCM Objective 1 and with SDG Indicator 17.18, which calls for more high-quality and reliable disaggregated data by gender, migrant status, ethnicity and race (GMDAC 2024). This mirrors the Auditor General's recommendation for more intersectional considerations within Canadian FFP (Auditor General of Canada 2023). Disaggregated data should also include marital and familial status. Given migrant women are overrepresented as dependent applicants, we must ensure that their experiences and stories are not overshadowed and are equally accounted for in Canadian migration programming and data (Canadian Council for Refugees 2019).

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