

# The Future of International Assistance: Canada's Role on the Global Stage

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## Issue

Despite allocating over 95 percent of its 2022 budget to gender-focused initiatives, Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) confronts a significant gap between its commitments and outcomes. This gap compromises the policy's effectiveness and jeopardizes a crucial chance to advance international aid for gender equality. Our analysis indicates that Canada could lead a more impactful global initiative by refining its approach to include clearer definitions, enhanced reporting and broader engagement strategies.

## FIAP Overview and Success

Canada's FIAP, adopted in 2017, aims to improve developmental outcomes globally, focusing on areas such as human dignity, inclusive governance and environmental action (Global Affairs Canada [GAC] 2021). The policy demonstrates a potential to empower aid recipients and legitimize women's participation in decision-making processes. A notable achievement has been the allocation of 99 percent of all Canadian bilateral aid towards projects promoting gender equality (ibid. 2023a). Top recipients of Canadian aid across any action area are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Sudan, Sudan and Ukraine (ibid. 2023b). FIAP showcases Canada's capacity to be a global leader in progressive policy. This approach elevates Canada's standing in multilateral institutions and provides a blueprint for other nations looking to follow in the creation of gender-focused policies through the gender equality toolkit. The toolkit provides clear assistance in planning, implementation, monitoring and reporting for

officials to ensure and achieve gender equality outcomes (ibid. 2024a).

## Recent Trends and Adjustments

Despite significant investment in the FIAP strategy, the national budget for traditional international assistance approaches has dwindled in recent years. This is seen in the 2023 funding falling by 15 percent, equaling a \$1.3 billion dollar reduction (Khan 2023). Reasons for the cuts have been attributed to issues such as COVID-19 response efforts and Russia's war on Ukraine, as these are seen as larger priorities to the government than international assistance (Grover 2023). These decisions to cut funding occurred regardless of calls to action by civil society organizations, humanitarian groups and advocacy groups nationally, due to ongoing food, conflict and democratic crises abroad (CanWaCH 2023). These recent trends and adjustments have been criticized for undermining the effectiveness of the policy, as well as Canada's leadership on the global stage.

## Critiques by Civil Society and Major Issues

Several critical concerns on FIAP have arisen from evaluative reviews from civil society, recipient feedback, and audit reports. GAC publicly committed to working more closely with civil society in 2020 to facilitate deeper grassroots engagement. The Feminist Foreign Policy Working Group (FFPWG), as a representative of several civil society actors, including Amnesty International, Above Ground and the Equality Fund, reported two primary concerns regarding the use and lack of clarity on key policy terminology.

The FFPWG found **definitional ambiguity impacted policy coherence**. The lack of clear definitions for feminism, feminist approaches and intersectionality has led to inconsistent implementation and misinterpretation of policy objectives (FFPWG 2021; Cadesky 2020). The undefined terms fail to incorporate inclusive language and neglect anti-oppressive and anti-racist approaches (FFPWG 2021). This vagueness results in broad, poorly implemented programs where almost any initiative can be labelled as feminist, ultimately undermining FIAP's goals and compromising its long-term feasibility (Morton, Muchiri and Swiss 2020).

The report also found that FIAP has a **limited economic focus**. Civil society respondents concluded that feminist policy should address economic justice and decolonization, prioritizing and uplifting marginalized communities (FFPWG 2021). The emphasis on individual economic empowerment overlooks systemic barriers that perpetuate economic inequality and hinder the equitable distribution of economic benefits (Cadesky 2020). With FIAP covering a substantial portion of Canada's international assistance, the policy must adopt a transformative approach centred on achieving gender equality and economic justice, as well as set specific goals to improve the circumstances of beneficiaries (Dicks and Woroniuk 2023; Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2023).

Our research uncovered **gaps in recipient feedback**. GAC currently uses results-based assessments that quantify success based on outcomes compared to predetermined indicators (GAC 2024b). This method does not currently include any direct recipient feedback. The FFPWG (2021) noted a desire from recipients outside of Canada to more deeply engage with the policy development process. Third-party assessments reveal that recipients often have limited access to government stakeholders beyond designated "gender experts" (Dobrovnik 2024). Results-based assessments alone are insufficient for capturing changes in structural inequalities. This method can inadvertently contribute to the furthering of paternal aid relationships and unequal power dynamics (Obrecht 2018).

The Equality Fund additionally completed a quantitative third-party review of FIAP investments in 2023. Both audits found **inadequacies regarding transparency in reporting and reliability practices**. The Equality Fund's report highlighted challenges in understanding resource flows and inconsistencies between GAC's internal investment tracking and reporting captured within the Organisation for Economic Co-operation

and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee's (DAC's) Creditor Reporting System (CRS), making it difficult to assess the quality and impact of initiatives (Dicks and Woroniuk 2023). The Auditor General reports failures in GAC's monitoring and reporting of outcomes against policy goals. Despite legal requirements mandating reporting progress under the Official Development Assistance Accountability Act and the Treasury Board's Policy on Results, significant weaknesses were found in how project information was managed and reported by the department (Office of the Auditor General of Canada 2023). Requests for documentation for auditing purposes were consistently unmet, indicating a lack of transparency and reliability in reporting.

### Engagement Strategy and Strategic International Comparisons

Sweden pioneered the world's first feminist foreign policy in 2014, inspiring similar approaches in France, Germany, Mexico and Spain (UN Women 2022). With the introduction of FIAP in Canada in 2017 came the introduction of the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security, and advanced gender equality initiatives through trade policy (FFPWG 2021). FIAP broadened Canada's previous efforts from a specific geographical focus with the intent to have the "greatest positive impact" (GAC 2021).

Despite differing policy limitations, conceptualizations and implementation, FIAP could gain valuable insight and lessons from the achievements and setbacks of other feminist foreign policy initiatives. Sweden's feminist foreign policy utilized a framework of the Three Rs, "women's Rights, with Resources and supporting increased female Representation" (Thompson and Clement 2020). In 2022, following the election of a more conservative government, Sweden abandoned its feminist foreign policy, describing the term feminist as failing its intended purpose and obscuring Swedish values and interests (Walfridsson 2023). These failures included the continuation of weapons exports to countries with recorded human rights abuses against women and girls, and stringent migration policies, leading to criticism of the policy (ibid. 2023). The contradictions between Sweden's policies and lack of cohesion resulted in the abandonment of the policy (Portillo 2023).

In 2021, Spain adopted its Action Plan for a Feminist Foreign Policy, which comprehensively transformed both national and international policies to promote gender equality through a feminist approach (Gobierno De España 2021). This approach included an emphasis

on intersectionality, along with annual reporting and monitoring of the policy's success, which was then presented to Parliament, various stakeholders and civil society. The cohesion of Spanish policy, along with consistent reporting mechanisms and the focus on public diplomacy, bolsters support internally and abroad.

While promoting several complementary feminist foreign policy initiatives, Canada does not describe its overall foreign policy as feminist. Canada has faced criticism similar to Sweden's with the continuation of military weapon sales to Saudi Arabia and a continual increase in defence spending without greater contributions for international assistance (Tiessen 2019). For a continuation of the policy across shifting political landscapes, Canada must learn from the failures of Sweden and the successful contemporary approach of Spain. These lessons are vital to ensure the continuation of this policy and the empowerment of women and girls across changing political realities. Given the current trend of reduced international assistance funding due to shifting priorities, it is crucial to use allocated funding in ways that benefit both recipients and Canada to ensure that the future of international assistance remains relevant.

## Recommendations

**FIAP should provide greater definitional transparency on the use of the term “feminism.”** FIAP must create clear and specific definitions of “feminist” and “feminism.” The current lack of conceptual clarity leads to vague interpretations and broad understandings, ultimately reducing the potential impact of the policy (FFPWG 2021). Although there is an inherent tension between the need for clear definitions for accountability and the need for flexibility to address cultural contexts, the general notions towards gender equality and empowerment within the policy are not enough. It is also important to note that this ambiguity may be strategic for this purpose of flexibility, and although this may have benefits, in practice it falls flat. Clearly defined conceptions can ensure FIAP can guide future aid programming, make a tangible impact on recipients, and avoid broad and unhelpful applications of the policy. If possible, a balanced-hybrid approach where strategic ambiguity is used necessarily to allow for cultural adaptation should be adopted, but still emphasizing core definitions and clarity.

**GAC should enhance the transparency and reliability of FIAP-related information reporting.** GAC assesses all FIAP-related projects and sorts them by gender-based coding markers internally. The OECD DAC's CRS provides

an independent review of FIAP funding but has reported discrepancies in GAC-reported data (Dicks and Woroniuk 2023). Data discrepancies and a lack of publicly available information make assessing the quality and impact of these investments difficult. Improving public reporting and implementing new coding guidance can ensure FIAP's goals translate into tangible benefits, address systemic power imbalances and promote local-level equity and empowerment.

**FIAP should focus on establishing direct recipient feedback channels to address paternalistic legacies of Global North-South aid relationships.** The federal government's participatory feedback approach selectively contacts stakeholders supporting donations in recipient nations. Without direct participation from all recipient states, there is a risk of overreliance on conclusions drawn by government officials, limiting the accuracy of assessments regarding the state of social progress (Obrecht 2018). Canada should prioritize the establishment of more direct feedback channels to mitigate the influence of underlying power dynamics and ensure a comprehensive understanding of recipient countries' unique needs and contexts. Further, Canada must enact pre-consultation with recipients of FIAP to better ensure meaningful results. The Government of Canada can draw upon its framework of duty to consult with Indigenous communities, which the Canadian government views as allowing to strengthen relationships and partnerships (Government of Canada 2024). Pre-consultation with communities prior to FIAP allocation will ensure meaningful allocation of resources and ensure the policy works with communities instead of imposing unwanted aid practices.

**FIAP should view gender equality as the end goal while remaining flexible to support those suffering from ongoing and persistent conflict.** FIAP utilizes gender equality as one strategy for a broader global poverty eradication effort, not as the policy's end goal. Without a transparent intersectional approach, these poverty reduction efforts of FIAP may fail to directly challenge patriarchal structures while continuing and promoting harmful gender roles (Cadesky 2020; Portillo 2023). Thus, FIAP, to support the empowerment of women and girls, must take a transformative intersectional approach with gender equality as its principal goal to ensure meaningful results. Further, FIAP's emphasis on poverty reduction efforts should not hinder its ability to provide emergency aid in ongoing and persistent conflict areas. As crises continue in Gaza, Sudan and Ukraine, Canada's aid must remain flexible and responsive, providing essential support such as food security, clean water, and other types of emergency aid for those who are suffering under conflict.

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