
International Affairs

What's Feminist about Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy?

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The first declared 'feminist' foreign policy (FFP) was announced by Sweden in 2014. Canada was second, announcing its "Feminist International Assistance Policy" (FIAP) in 2017, putting into practice the Government of Canada's "long-standing international reputation as a leader on gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls and the protection of their rights" (GACb, 2017, para 1). Mexico and France have similarly followed suit (Thomson, 2020). The popular uptake of FFPs is a growing trend in international discourse, perhaps demonstrating the codification of gender equality in international policy. FFPs, however, are not clearly defined; there is no set definition (Cadesky, 2020; Thomson, 2020). Rather, states are free to use the term in foreign policy as they please. The question, therefore, arises: how are FFPs, and the FIAP, feminist? This paper investigates the efficacy of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy approach to gender equality, drawing from a post-structural feminist perspective. We will find that, rooted in Western conceptions of gender and following liberal and sometimes neoliberal influences, FFPs can reinforce gender disparities. After first defining a few

forms of feminism, we will explore the lack of structural analysis, the emphasis of market oriented solutions, the neglect of intersectionality and the reinforcement of binaries. With these criticisms in mind, we will discuss the applicability of the term 'feminism' in Canada's FIAP concluding that this international assistance policy follows an ideology that falls between feminism and anti-feminism. Its claim to feminism, therefore, is weak.

Neglect of Structural Influence

Feminism is the movement that fights for gender equality, the equal access, treatment, capabilities, and responsibilities of all genders. Importantly, the feminist method is not interested in simply adding women but in revealing and removing systemic disparities for people of marginalized genders, inclusive of cisgender women, transgender individuals, and all people who identify outside of the binary (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016; Scheyer & Kumskova, 2019). Post-structural feminism posits that gender and society are co-constructed. As such, the Western understanding of gender is constructed by

societal norms and expectations that fall within a masculine/feminine binary. Concurrently, gender plays a critical part in the establishment of social structures and power relations. From this perspective, politics and the role of the state are inherently gendered. Historically dominated by men, masculine principles are preferred and promoted in politics: individualism and the autonomous self (Robinson, 2021), militarism (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018), saviorism, hierarchical and monopolistic systems of authority (Scheyer & Kumskova, 2019), and the selective value of “real work” versus feminized “care work” (Kamara, 2016). Hence, systemic reform is required to progress gender equality.

At a global level, liberal feminism is the predominant feminist narrative, sometimes called mainstream feminism (Zhukova et al., 2022). Liberal feminism follows theories of standard liberalism where liberty, rights of the individual, and consent to be governed are key values. In the understanding that current systems of governance and society are liberal, liberal feminism aims to integrate women into the structure of mainstream society and reach gender parity through reforms of the pre-existing system that improve its accessibility (Zhukova et al., 2022). This approach promotes gender mainstreaming methods for gender equality, which advocate for the inclusion of women in pre-existing systems in the view that increasing women’s representation will inherently lead to the consideration of gender within these structures (Aggestam & Bergman-Rosamond, 2016). Studies show that women’s representation within decision-making processes alone does not

ensure more equitable results; rather, it is the influence that women carry in these processes that creates productive change (Scheyer & Kumskova, 2019). The achieved result of integrating women into a patriarchal system without addressing the root causes of gender inequality and the gendered nature of systems is the reproduction of existing power relations. Though liberal feminism can lead to better access for women to societal hierarchies, certain traits, especially masculine traits, are essential to this success, sidestepping meaningful progress towards gender equality (Robinson, 2021). The gendered systems that prioritize masculine traits need to be identified and deconstructed. Yet, the FIAP’s strategy remains silent on this front, primarily relying on women’s representation rather than their meaningful engagement within systems or the reconstruction of systems to facilitate meaningful engagement.

Neoliberalism and Market Superiority

In the context of Canada’s FIAP, we can go further to characterize this policy as feminist neoliberalism, where the application of liberal feminism is centered around women’s integration into the market as objects of labour (Thomson, 2020). The FIAP states:

Canada is adopting a Feminist International Assistance Policy that seeks to eradicate poverty and build a more peaceful, more inclusive and more prosperous world. Canada firmly believes that promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is the most effective approach to

achieving this goal. (GACa, 2017, Canada's feminist vision)

Despite self-describing as “feminist”, here, gender equality is used as a means to an end — poverty eradication — rather than an end unto itself (Thomson, 2020; Zhukova et al., 2022). The FIAP explains poverty through gender inequality and exclusion yet overlooks systemic roots of gender equality ingrained in politics. Thus, the immense challenge of poverty that the FIAP aims to solve is left without a comprehensive analysis to guide its solution. Rather, the FIAP relies on neoliberal logic, emphasizing the importance of market integration to alleviate poverty.

The use of neoliberal logic as a form of poverty reduction, however, is often detrimental to the advancement of gender equality. Women’s integration into the labour market can further reinforce unequal structures that contribute to the oppression of women (Calkin, 2015). Without significant efforts to appreciate the value of care labour and other feminized work, market inclusion of individuals who provide feminized labour increases their workload as they become active in the formal economy while maintaining the same amount of informal labour in the home (Kamara, 2016). This reinforces unequal division of labour rather than balancing it at a national level. Further, by prioritizing the inclusion of women in the workforce in developing nations without progressive change towards dissolving systemic gender inequalities within the practices of Canadian industries (Macdonald, 2019), the FIAP reproduces gendered international economic

hierarchies, encouraging women’s market integration low in the production chain while high-earning positions remain overwhelmingly held by men in the West. As long as men and masculine attributes continue to dominate the private sector world, adding women to the bottom of supply chains will not lead to gender equality but rather reinforce international patriarchal systems.

Lack of Intersectionality and Diversity: Gender Essentialism and Emphasis on Binaries

An essential component of post-structural feminism is the importance of diversity and intersectionality in gender identity and the critique of gender essentialism. Gender essentialism is common throughout mainstream feminist texts where, despite prominent academic criticism against the simplification of gender issues to those solely of women (Rai, 2011), gender equality remains narrowly focused on considerations of women (Cadesky, 2020). The FIAP uses gender essentialist language where gender equates women, excluding people of diverse genders who are similarly marginalized and where women, as a static homogenous group, are defined through constructed masculine/feminine binaries rather than considering the fluid and diverse nature of peoples of marginalized genders and the influence of society on the construction of such identities (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018; Cadesky, 2020). The text characterizes women as mothers, caregivers, and vulnerable, often conflated

with girls, actively playing into the “women and children syndrome,” whereby women and children are viewed as similarly fragile (Puechguirbal, 2010, as cited in Cadesky, 2020, p. 301). Further, “women and girls” are used in parallel and often synonymously with “the world’s poorest and most vulnerable” in the FIAP (GACa, 2017). Though other “vulnerable people” are mentioned, it is unclear where they fit in. The way gender equality is addressed repeats essentialist language where “gender equality” is used interchangeably with “empowerment”. Emphasizing that the FIAP will empower women and girls implies that they are powerless and helpless (Morton et al., 2020).

This gender essentialist language not only impacts the perception of women, but also reinforces international hierarchies along adversarial, binary logic of right versus wrong, and inside versus outside. Foreign policy is an instrument through which states dictate their beliefs to the outside world (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018). They are inherently tied to national perception (Thomson, 2020), hence validating their intervention in outside “wrongs” by applying internal ideals to external circumstances (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018). The FIAP’s language around the empowerment of women not only victimizes the recipients, women, and girls, but also simultaneously demonstrates Canada’s self-concept as superior, showcasing its paternalistic character as an actor responsible for dictating the solution to gender inequality outside of its borders while ignoring internal inequalities.

The FIAP’s narrow conceptualization of women, let alone gender, hinders the

policy’s ability to enact real change. Not only does this hinder progress towards gender equality, but it can further marginalize people of diverse genders, people of colour, people with disabilities and other social categorizations oppressed by unequal systems (Achilleos-Sarll, 2018; Morton et al., 2020). Though the FIAP does mention other identities such as Indigenous peoples, youth and children, LGBTQ2I+, peoples with disabilities, minorities, and refugees, none of these identities are present across all six Action Areas of the FIAP, nor are they considered together as intersectional (Morton et al., 2020). Further, the FIAP says nothing of how the interaction of these diverse identities will be taken into account in the policy’s implementation despite claiming to be an intersectional approach (Morton et al., 2020), giving the appearance of intersectionality without the capability to fulfill this essential component.

Despite intensive consultation with local partners, the FIAP imposes “top-down feminism” (Robinson, 2021, p. 25), unresponsive to local gender dynamics or forms of feminism (Rao & Tiessen, 2020). This lack of intersectionality and reflexivity of the policy leads to concrete issues where inequalities are reinforced, both at the local and global level (Calkin, 2015; Rao & Tiessen, 2020; Robinson, 2021). Focusing solely on women and girls, excluding men and boys, let alone gender-diverse folk, can lead to the disempowerment of all such groups and the consequent resentment of those not formally recognized, further entrenching gender disparities (Rao & Tiessen, 2020). Rather, the state, as a self-appointed protective entity, intervenes as it

thinks best regardless of local sentiments, unable to understand the victimization of foreign states within their gendered international structure. This approach ultimately contributes to perceptions of binary divides between “us” and “other,” where the state mediates the space in-between, affirming it is in the right, ultimately reducing the empowerment of “other” women by dictating the correct approach to gender equality.

Is it Really Feminism?

This structurally blind, market-oriented economic, narrow and exclusionary approach to gender equality, as fits the FIAP, sits uncomfortably close to post-feminism. Post-feminism is a philosophy positioned between feminism and anti-feminism that posits that gender equality has been achieved for the most part, rejecting any calls to political action. Instead, it focuses on gender parity as a tool for economic gain (Calkin, 2015). Post-feminist labels are particularly applied to more strictly financial organizations (e.g. the World Bank), but certain aspects of the FIAP fit particularly well within this framework. By refusing to recognize or address the unequal power relations within the system, the FIAP’s use of gender, or more accurately ‘women and girls’, becomes depoliticized. Instead, an individualistic approach is emphasized, especially alongside the promotion of market inclusion, which removes the impetus of the state to correct systemic inequalities and places the burden on the individual (Thomson, 2020). Additionally, by avoiding the structural causes of gender inequalities, it reinforces existing structures,

dismissing inequalities as natural differences rather than their social and structural construction, reinforcing the validity of post-feminist views.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the critique of the FIAP’s priorities and rhetoric leaves one less than satisfied with their commitment to gender equality. Rooted in Western norms and influenced by liberal and neoliberal institutions, the FIAP lacks structural analysis of the root causes of gender inequality, relies on an economic model for its solution, and functions within narrow conceptions of gender, overlooking diversity and intersectionality that play key roles in gender relations, which can further reinforce gender disparities rather than reduce them. It may fit into a definition of feminism, namely liberal feminism; however, due to the lack of structural analysis, repeated use of gender essentialism and binary logic, and lack of intersectionality and diverse perspectives, it does not hold as a strong piece of feminist work from a post-structuralist perspective. As stated by Rao and Tiessen: “feminist language does not guarantee effective [...] work” (2020, p. 354). To the contrary, when feminist rhetoric does not effectively fight for, let alone achieve, gender equality, it undermines other feminist work.

Footnotes

1. Typical language in policy regarding gender equality substitutes peoples of marginalized genders with only women, essentially excluding

individuals of genders outside the binary and ignoring the intersectional issues faced by transgendered people. As such much of this paper will discuss women (and sometimes girls).

2. The top-down approach is an approach to management (public or

private) where decisions are made at the highest level in a power hierarchy and dictated to the lower levels in contrast with bottom up approach where decisions are made by the beneficiaries and implemented by those in higher positions of power

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