

Whose feminism(s)? Overseas partner organizations' perceptions of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy

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Abstract

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy, introduced in 2017, is an ambitious and forward-thinking policy focussed on gender equality and women's empowerment. The emphasis on a feminist vision, however, raises questions about how feminism is defined and interpreted by Canada's partners in the Global South. In this article, we examine the interpretations of feminism(s) and a feminist foreign policy from the perspective of NGO staff members in East and Southern Africa. The research involved interviews with 45 Global South partner country NGO staff members in three countries (Kenya, Uganda, and Malawi). We consider the partner organization reflections on Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy using a transnational feminist lens. Our findings provide insights into future considerations for Canada's feminist foreign policy priorities, consultations, and programme design.

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Keywords

Feminist foreign assistance policy, partnerships, gender equality, Canadian Aid

Since the introduction and launch of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), development actors have analyzed the significance of the policy for current and future aid investments and policy implementation processes. Canada's FIAP outlines a "targeted approach to gender equality that allows a focus on the initiatives that fight poverty and inequality by supporting gender equality and defending the rights of women and girls, particularly their sexual health and reproductive rights."¹ Using a rights-based approach to development, the FIAP's priorities include climate change, peace and security, inclusive governance, and human dignity. The policy describes specific sector targets as well. The FIAP aims to strengthen access to quality health services and education opportunities and nutritional options that better address the particular needs of women and girls.² Women's leadership in environment and climate action is prioritized, and this theme includes introducing economic opportunities for women in clean energy. All these measures are aimed at contributing to broader social and economic issues including: stronger economic growth, reduction of instances of extreme poverty, reduction of chronic hunger, and longer-lasting peace that benefits entire families.³ Some scholars, policy experts, and development practitioners applauded the policy for building on the existing work of the Canadian government and civil society organizations to centre development challenges around gender equality and women's empowerment. Canada's NGO community has indicated a high level of support for Canada's FIAP. For example, CARE Canada reports that the FIAP is "bringing attention to previously neglected areas, including adolescent sexual health, sexual and gender-based violence and sexual violence, placing LGBTQ2 rights firmly as a development issue."⁴ The Canadian Council for International Cooperation also sees the FIAP as a welcome support to the ongoing work of their members, especially through specific funding targets and including "gender equality and women's empowerment" as a core action and as a

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1. Government of Canada, "Feminist International Assistance Policy," Government of Canada, Ottawa, 2017, 18, http://international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng (accessed September 17, 2020).
 2. Government of Canada, "Feminist International Assistance Policy," 18.
 3. *Ibid.*, viii.
 4. Marianne Davidson, "Canada's global feminist leadership matters," *The Hill Times*, 4 February, 2019, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2019/02/04/canadas-global-feminist-leadership-matters/186225> (accessed 17 September 2020).

cross-cutting issue.⁵ Others suggest that the FIAP extends the decades of work by the Canadian government and represents a return as a global leader in gender equality.⁶ The FIAP signals an important step forward to a more comprehensive feminist foreign policy for Canada. It also marks a significant departure from the Harper Conservative government, where gender equality was erased from Canada's policy priorities.⁷

The FIAP's shortcomings are also widely discussed in academic, policy, and practitioner circles.⁸ The general description of feminist approaches to development in the FIAP leaves a high level of ambiguity as to how feminism is defined in the policy document and in practice. In the lead-up to the launch of Canada's FIAP, extensive consultations took place between 2016 and 2017 with 15,000 staff from organizations, including overseas partners based in 65 different countries and nine in-person events in Canada.⁹ Since the policy launch in June 2017, questions remain about how the FIAP will be implemented in the targeted countries and regions, how feminist interventions will be monitored and evaluated, and whether partner organizations in the Global South even embrace the language of feminism and/or understand what is meant by a feminist international assistance policy. In this paper, we consider how feminism is defined and by whom, and the context in which power relations and intersectional considerations are mentioned in the policy. These main critiques of the FIAP and its particular brand of feminism point to some of the potential limitations for its future effectiveness.¹⁰ Data

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5. Shannon Kindornay and Fraser Riley-King, "Transforming our world: Canadian perspectives on the Sustainable Development Goals," Canadian Coalition for International Cooperation (CCIC), 2016, 2.
 6. Rebecca Tiessen, "Gender equality and the 'two CIDAs': Successes and setbacks between 1976 and 2013," in Stephen Brown, Molly den Heyer, and David R. Black, eds., *Rethinking Canadian Aid* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2016), 195–209; Stephen Brown and Liam Swiss, "Canada's International Assistance Policy: Game changer or fig leaf," in Katherine A.H. Graham and Allan M. Maslove, eds., *How Ottawa Spends, 2017–2018* (Ottawa: Carleton University, 2017), 117–132.
 7. See also Rebecca Tiessen, "Gender equality and the two CIDAs," 195–209; 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 Lagasse, eds., *Justin Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy: Canada Among Nations* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 187–205.
 8. Lyric Thompson and Tara Daniel, "Feminist foreign policy discussion series: Furthering accountability and centering climate change," International Center for Research on Women, Washington, DC, 2019; Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights, Oxfam Canada, and Inter Pares, "A feminist approach to Canada's international assistance," Action Canada, Oxfam Canada, and Inter pares, 2016; "Tackling inequalities in the global economy: Making Canada's foreign policy work for women," Oxfam Canada, Ottawa, 2017; "Pathways for achieving gender equality through health and its social determinants: Guiding implementation of the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), CanWaCH, Ottawa, December 2017, <https://www.canwach.ca/sites/default/files/resources/2018-04/CanWaCH%20Policy%20Brief%20-%20Feminist%20International%20Assistance%20Policy.pdf> (accessed September 2020).
 9. Government of Canada, "What we heard: 2016 International assistance review," Government of Canada, Ottawa, 2016, https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_developpement-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/what_we_heard-que_nous_entendu.aspx?lang=eng (accessed March 2020).
 10. Christoph Zeurcher, "Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy: Can bad policy be well implemented? (Part 1)," Centre for International Policy Studies, Ottawa, 13 September 2018,

collected from development NGOs and partner organizations that received funding from Global Affairs Canada based in three East and Southern African countries point to both converging and diverging perceptions of gender quality, women's empowerment, and feminism. Based on the analysis of this data, we argue that the FIAP's success can be realized only by re-centring feminism as transnational and ensuring that a feminist process (which includes diverse voices and attempts to mitigate unequal power relations) for policy implementation is securely in place.

The article begins by introducing the policy, and outlining both its key strengths and critiques. It then integrates a transnational feminist perspective to analyze both the shortcomings of the policies and its implications for implementation in the Global South. Through analysis of data collected in 2018 from Malawi, Kenya, and Uganda, we draw upon varying levels of acceptance and contestations around feminism that further reveal not only the ambiguity of the policy but also the potential for achieving transformative change through the inclusion of a more transnational feminist lens. The authors conclude by showing the ways in which staff based in the Global South are cautiously optimistic about a feminist approach to development, but also recognize the urgent need for further dialogue and input from partners, calling for the Canadian government to adopt a bolder approach to defining feminism that is more inclusive of social, cultural, political, and regional differences.

FIAP: How is feminism defined and by whom?

Canada's FIAP must be understood as part of a long history of Canadian commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment, including a range of efforts to streamline gender across Global Affairs Canada programming and to integrate a Gender-based Analysis Plus lens to all Canadian government actions. The shift in language from gender equality and women's empowerment to a feminist approach to international assistance is significant; however, in the absence of a clear definition of feminism, it remains unclear how Canada's FIAP marks either a clear departure from previous policy approaches or a continuation of existing approaches. References to feminism in the document are limited to only a few examples, primarily in relation to the title of the document. The feminist approach prescribed in the FIAP can best be summarized in relation to two introductory statements in the policy: "A feminist approach is much more than focusing on women and girls; rather, it is the most effective way to address the root causes of poverty" and "Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy recognizes that supporting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is the best way to build a more peaceful, more inclusive, and more prosperous world."¹¹

<https://www.cips-cepi.ca/2018/09/13/feminist-international-assistance-can-bad-policy-be-well-implemented-part-1/> (accessed December, 2019).

11. Government of Canada, "Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy," ii.

These statements demonstrate a targeted focus on the empowerment of women and girls but within the context of power relations and structural inequality.¹²

Where the FIAP has been especially clear is in its targeted action areas (identified through the consultation process), which include gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as the core area of work (with commitments to reducing sexual and gender-based violence, strengthening of women's organizations and movements, and improved capacity of the government to conduct gender analyses); human dignity (including increased access to basic services such as health care and humanitarian needs through a gender lens); growth that works for everyone (with emphasis on women's increased access to—and control over—economic opportunities and resources); environment and climate action (advancing women's leadership and decision-making in climate change mitigation, adaptation, and innovation); inclusive governance (with commitments to ending gender discrimination, protecting human rights, building stronger institutions and increasing women's political participation); and peace and security (emphasizing the participation of women, their increased representation in the security sector and gender-sensitive policies that address sexual abuse and violence).¹³

Nonetheless, the lack of a clear definition of feminism in the policy is one of the main concerns brought forward by both practitioners and academics.¹⁴ As Brown and Swiss note:

Without defining feminism, the policy outlines Global Affairs Canada's understanding of a feminist approach to international assistance as: human rights-based and inclusive; strategically focused on initiatives that best empower women and girls and reduce gender inequalities; challenging unequal power relations, discrimination and harmful norms and practices; and reliant on gender-based analysis while being accountable for results.¹⁵

While the policy is explicitly described as feminist, references to women's empowerment and gender equality are largely superficial, and the extent of the feminist policy approach is unclear. In related research, Jessica Cadesky et al. argue that the emphasis on women and girls in the policy is generally equated with addressing gender inequities, where targeting women and girls in interventions is presented as a "magic bullet" to resolve complex social, economic, and political challenges.¹⁶

12. Ibid., vi.

13. Ibid.

14. Tiessen and Swan, "Canada's feminist foreign policy promises"; Kindornay and Reilly-King, "Transforming our world: Canadian perspectives on the Sustainable Development Goals," Canadian Council for International Cooperation, Ottawa, 2016, <https://www.actioncanadashr.org/resources/reports-analysis/2016-01-20-transforming-our-world-canadian-perspectives-sustainable-development-goals> (accessed September 2020).

15. Brown and Swiss, "Canada's International Assistance Policy," 118.

16. Jessica Cadesky, Matt Baillie Smith and Nisha Thomas, "The gendered experiences of local volunteers in conflicts and emergencies," *Gender & Development* 27, no 2, (2019): 371–388. See also: Sydney Calkin, "Post-feminist spectatorship and the girl effect: 'Go ahead, really imagine her'."

Such critiques of the FIAP point to the instrumentalization of the narrative of women and girls' empowerment rather than identifying strategies to address the systemic barriers and complexity of gender inequality.¹⁷ The inclusion of women and girls in development processes is an important but insufficient commitment to gender equality and feminist outcomes.

Yet, several examples of broader and strategic commitments to gender equality can be found within the FIAP. For example, the FIAP explicitly acknowledges that a feminist approach "does not limit the focus of their effort of women and girls; rather, it is the most effective way to fight the root causes of poverty that can affect everyone: inequality and exclusion."¹⁸ It also reinforces the need to engage men and boys to "challenge traditions and customs that support and maintain gender inequalities."¹⁹ However, references to engaging men and boys are few,²⁰ and these are only a fragment of the diversity of voices required to realize a feminist approach, inclusive of communities and regions that the policy aims to support. It is important to remember that, even in the absence of the explicit use of feminist language and policy, "feminist-inspired work can take place."²¹ In fact, the presence of feminist language does not guarantee effective development work;²² likewise, a feminist policy can also dismiss development efforts from feminist organizations by minimizing opportunities for advocacy or movement building. The language of feminism must be understood within the diverse contexts in which it is being used. Ines Smyth argues that feminist development can "inhabit two separate domains: that of the women's movement on the one hand, and that of development bureaucracies (including NGOs) on the other."²³ In other words, feminist development in policy and in practice depends on context-specific experiences, histories, and everyday realities that are shaped by global, regional, and local structural inequalities. As such, feminist assistance policies can be limiting in their effectiveness, depending on how they are designed, presented, and implemented. We turn to some of those limitations below.

Third World Quarterly 36, no. 4 (3 April 2015): 654–669; Kathryn Moeller, *The Gender Effect: Capitalism, Feminism, and the Corporate Politics of Development* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

17. See for example: Rebecca Tiessen and David Black, "Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy: To whom is Canada back?" in Nimijean, R. and D. Carment, eds., *Canada, Nation Branding and Domestic Politics* (Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge, 2019), Chapter 4.
18. Government of Canada, "Feminist International Assistance Policy," 18.
19. *Ibid.*, 10.
20. Jane Parpart, "Militarized masculinities, heroes and gender inequality during and after the nationalist struggle in Zimbabwe," *NORMA* 10 no. 3–4 (2015): 312–325.
21. Ines Smyth, "Talking of gender: Words and meanings in development organizations," in Andrea Cornwall and Deborah Eade, eds., *Deconstructing Development Discourse Buzzwords and Fuzzwords* (London: Oxfam GB, 2010), 145.
22. *Ibid.*, 146.
23. *Ibid.*, 146.

Limitations

One of the common critiques of Canada's FIAP is the instrumentalization of gender equality and women's empowerment throughout the policy document. Evidence of instrumentalization can be found in the very brief way in which intersectionality and power relations are mentioned in the policy.²⁴ As Christine Bose points out, an intersectional feminist framework analyzes variations in gender inequalities across many nations.²⁵ In this sense, the FIAP mentions that the policy "places gender equality at the centre of poverty eradication and peacebuilding efforts by challenging the discrimination faced by women and girls around the world and by recognizing the inequalities that exist along intersectional lines."²⁶ Yet, there is no mention of how these variations in gender inequalities within certain contexts are included in the policy.

Feminist legal and social studies scholars widely consider integrating intersectionality into foreign policy as an acknowledgement of the diverse approaches to feminism, recognizing "that major systems of oppression interlock rather than operate separately."²⁷ At the same time, Corinne Mason argues that the two references to intersectionality in the FIAP are merely "added on" to the central framing of "women and girls," with the targeting of women and girls as the axis of analysis. The concept of intersectionality in the FIAP thus dismisses hierarchical power analysis and instead highlights difference as merely a point of discrimination (a technical fix), as opposed to a point of marginalization (a systemic reality).²⁸ In particular, this subtle insertion of intersectionality as a consideration of inequities risks ignoring or even reinforcing existing structural barriers that maintain, rather than challenge, sources or "root causes of oppression," as mentioned in the FIAP. This reference to intersectionality is combined with only two references to power relations, where "the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls require the transformation of social norms and power relations."²⁹ Here, power relations are associated with systemic discrimination as opposed to hierarchical forms of marginalization that are structurally bound and shape the exclusion of certain populations based on class, regional, sex, ethnic, and socio-economic differences. This kind of framing of intersectionality and power relations often translates into targeted interventions geared at women and girls while bypassing important rights-based work that is required to end inequality.³⁰ As Andrea Cornwall reminds us, "the practical equivalence between 'gender' and

24. See Sam E. Morton, Judyannet Muchiri, and Liam Swiss, "Which feminism(s)? For whom? Intersectionality in Canada's FIAP," *International Journal* (forthcoming in this *IJ* collection).

25. C. E. Bose, "Intersectionality and global gender inequality," *Gender and Society* 26, no. 1 (2012): 67–72.

26. Government of Canada, "Feminist International Assistance Policy," 8.

27. Olena Hankivsky and Julia S. Jordan-Zachery, *The Palgrave Handbook of Intersectionality in Public Policy* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), vi.

28. Corinne Mason, "Buzzwords and fuzzwords: Flattening intersectionality in Canadian Aid," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 25, no. 2 (2019): 208.

29. Government of Canada, "Feminist International Assistance Policy," 9.

30. Tiessen and Swan, "Canada's feminist foreign policy promises."

‘women’s issues’ and the narrow focus on other ‘gender relations’ obscure the analytic importance of gender as a constitutive element of all social relationships and as signifying a relationship of power.”³¹ Although the mention of both intersectionality and power relations in the policy offers an opportunity for further dialogue, there is no mention of who will have a say on the implications of this framing for future Canadian aid programming.

Although an extensive consultation process with input from partners based in the Global South fed into the development of the FIAP, the consultations placed little emphasis on how feminism was perceived in particular cultural, social, and political settings or how the FIAP aims to address through a feminist lens the structural barriers of gender equality in these distinct settings. The actual number of potential and current overseas partner organizations involved and the kinds of questions and considerations included in these consultations were not made public. As Cornwall notes in other policy development initiatives, “the depth of insight gained in the process is questionable, especially without the contextual knowledge to situate who speaks and what they speak about.”³² There remains, therefore, a high degree of ambiguity over whose feminisms are represented, how feminism is defined and by whom, and how the FIAP will take shape in particular contexts.

Delayed guidelines in the implementation process

While the FIAP offers a promising opportunity for advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment, the implementation processes of the policy leave a crucial gap in realizing this potential and in the extent to which future programming based on the policy will remain “feminist” in the short- and long-term plans. The Harper government gradually reduced funding for gender equality to CAD\$1.6 million in 2014, down from CAD\$7.6 million in 2008.³³ During the first two years after the launch of the FIAP, the government did not share clear guidance on the implementation of the policy with civil society organizations and their overseas partner organizations. As well, during the first year of its release, the government offered no new funds for projects, limiting any progress or concrete changes to existing operational activities. Projects already in place were expected to integrate reporting targets to accommodate the policy. New guidance documents were aimed at supporting these new requirements, but they included no reference to the transformative, or intersectional, rights-based approach implied in the policy.

Global Affairs assures that, by the 2021–2022 budget, 95% of Canada’s bilateral international development assistance initiatives will target or integrate gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.³⁴ Spending targets for the policy also include CAD\$150 million allocated over five years to local

31. Andrea Cornwall, “Who’s voices and whose choices? Reflections on gender and participatory development,” *World Development* 31, no. 8 (2003): 1326.

32. *Ibid.*, 1336.

33. Brown and Swiss, “Canada’s International Assistance Policy,” 121.

34. Government of Canada, “Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy,” 9.

organizations to advance women's rights.³⁵ This amounts to approximately CAD \$30 million per year from 2017. Initial funds under the Women's Voice in Leadership programme were allocated to organizations invited to propose a project with their existing partners, excluding other organizations focused on gender equality and limited in resources and visibility. In 2019, two significant funding announcements secured the government commitment leading up to the fall national election. In June 2019, Global Affairs Canada announced an annual CAD\$700 million investment for reproductive rights and sexual rights over 10 years.³⁶ Many organizations submitted proposals in October 2019, through an open call. During the Women Deliver conference,³⁷ a joint announcement between Match International and Global Affairs Canada³⁸ revealed the launch of the Equality Fund, a global investment fund to support women's organizations and feminist movements based in Canada and overseas. The Fund, run through Match International and governed by a global collective of leaders in women's movements and international development included an initial CAD\$400 million investment.³⁹ These announcements and commitment to investments demonstrate progress towards both sectoral support and to strengthening the capacity of women's organizations in the Global South. However, the government mechanisms in which funding is administered to Canadian organizations and their overseas partners through Global Affairs Canada remains "business as usual." Open or invited calls neglect to recognize the value of long-term partnership-building between donors and organizations and subsequent responsive programming. While supported by Global Affairs Canada, administration of the Equality Fund remains at the discretion of the consortium of organizations involved. Swiss and Brown predict that country government and organization offices will administer such funds through small incremental programmes, while also leaving these country offices to navigate the discrepancies and diverging views on feminist aid of its partners, stakeholders, and potential beneficiaries.⁴⁰

Different feminist approaches guide different strategies and lead to a range of outcomes. For example, feminist approaches can focus on the inclusion of individual women within existing systems or the status quo (described as mainstream,

35. Brown and Swiss, "Canada's International Assistance Policy," 119.

36. Government of Canada, "Government of Canada makes historic investment to promote the health and rights of women and girls around the world," Government of Canada press release, 4 June 2019, <https://pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2019/06/04/government-canada-makes-historic-investment-promote-health-and-rights> (accessed September 2020).

37. The Women Deliver conference is a bi-annual global conference on gender equality and the health, rights, and well-being of girls and women. See: <https://wd2019.org/>

38. The announcement was made by the Minister of International Development and the Minister of Women and Gender Equality, Maryam Monsef, 7 June 2019.

39. The Globe and Mail, "Trudeau government investing C\$300-million in women's equality in Canada and developing countries," 2 June 2019, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-trudeau-government-investing-300-million-in-womens-equality-in/> (accessed September 2020).

40. Brown and Swiss, "Canada's International Assistance Policy," 120.

instrumentalist, or liberal feminism).⁴¹ Feminist approaches can also address the systemic barriers to gender equality and seek to transform the structures of inequality that prevent marginalized groups from succeeding (defined as transformative feminism).⁴² The FIAP contains traces of transformative feminism, through brief mentions of intersectionality, power relations, and the inclusion of men and boys in the process. The FIAP also facilitates direct collaboration with overseas women's organizations, which are well placed to receive the CAD\$100 million investment and could delve into the structural inequalities that they themselves identify. Yet little is known of the implementation mechanisms in place that demonstrate transformative development. Overall, the policy remains situated in the instrumentalist, liberal feminist category by locating opportunities for women within existing structural inequalities, such as access to health and education systems and loan and employment access. The FIAP requires a transnational feminism approach that enables an analytical emphasis on "relations to colonial, neocolonial, and imperial histories and practices on different geographical scales."⁴³ A transnational feminist investment and donor support to women's organizations based in the Global South ensures this kind of guiding framework, both to implement feminist assistance policies and to make certain that these intersectional categories of marginalization (including sex, race, ethnicity, disability, and LGBTQ identity) across global, regional, and local scales are considered in both policy and in praxis.

In spite of its specific discursive strengths and shortcomings, the FIAP offers new opportunities for framing gender equality and women's empowerment in partner country development programming. However, a feminist vision also requires a feminist implementation process. The policy is a promising step towards realizing transformative development that is rooted in tackling underlying gender inequality and supporting women's empowerment. However, the needs and participation of partner organizations based in the Global South are undermined by the limited consultative processes after its launch in 2017, the omission of a concept of feminism defined and accepted by potential and future overseas partners, and lack of clear guidelines on implementation. At the same time, the development and launch of the FIAP expanded opportunities for further dialogue around feminisms and represents an emphasis on gender equality and women's empowerment that could potentially support transformative aid policy.

41. See: Rebecca Tiessen "What's new about Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy: The problems and possibilities of 'more of the same,'" (The School of Public Policy and the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2019), https://www.cgai.ca/whats_new_about_canadas_feminist_international_assistance_policy_the_problem_and_possibilities_of_more_of_the_same, (accessed 5 May 2020); See also: Karin Aggestam, Annika Bergman Rosamond, and Annica Kronsell, "Theorising feminist foreign policy," *International Relations* 33, no. 1 (March 2019): 23–39.

42. Tiessen and Black, "Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy?"

43. Jacqui M. Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Cartographies of knowledge and power. Transnational feminism as radical praxis," in A. L. Swarr and R. Nagar, eds., *Critical Transnational Feminist Praxis* (New York: SUNY Press, 2010) 23–45.

Furthermore, a feminist approach to development should also include perspectives and meanings of equality from the Global South. A transnational perspective of feminist development offers a lens through which to include the diversity of voices to fully capture social, environmental, and political difference and the specific ways in which gendered conditions shape them.⁴⁴ Awino Okech and Dinah Musindarwezo suggest that the conceptualization of transnational feminism, “strives to liberate [itself] from the political and intellectual constraints of international feminism and global feminisms—disrupting north/south dichotomies.”⁴⁵ It reorients feminism towards the perceptions of those based in the Global South, thereby redefining transformative development processes in contextual, political, and social terms. Without an explicit transnational feminist orientation, the FIAP remains bounded by existing structural constraints that risk perpetuating rather than responding to inequalities. Therefore, analyzing perceptions of feminism from the Global South (and in this article from three countries in East and Southern Africa) offers insights into how the FIAP could realign with feminist principles that resonate with transnational rather than instrumentalist framings.

Methods

This research is based on data collected in 2018 in Malawi, Kenya, and Uganda with international development organizations that partner (or have partnered) with Canadian civil society organizations. The participants were selected on the basis of their status as non-governmental partner organizations working in partnership with Western-based development NGOs. The partner NGOs in Malawi, Kenya, and Uganda were all actively engaged in donor-funded development programming and had, at some point, received international volunteers to support their development work. The partner NGOs include a range of development organizations focussing on diverse areas of specialization from agriculture to health to economic empowerment. As staff members at development NGOs, the participants in this study were generally familiar with such terms as gender equality and women’s empowerment as a result of several decades of gender mainstreaming initiatives in the region and were very likely to deliver programmes that consider gender or women’s issues.

In-person interviews were carried out in these three countries by locally-based research assistants. The research assistants included a Canadian who was living in Uganda, a Kenyan based in Kenya, and a Malawian who is living in Malawi. The research assistants were provided training and direction on the nature of semi-structured, informal interviews. In total, 15 semi-structured interviews were carried out in each country with both male (22) and female (23) staff from local development NGOs for a total of 45 transcribed interviews across the three countries. The

44. Jean H. Quataert, “A knowledge revolution: Transnational feminist contributions to international development agendas and policies, 1965–1995,” *Global Social Policy* 14, no. 2 (2014): 209.

45. Awino Okech and Dinah Musindarwezo, “Transnational feminism and the post-2015 development agenda,” *Soundings: A Journal of Politics and Culture* 71, no. 71 (2019): 76.

interview data were organized thematically into core areas of analysis in categories that reflected perceptions pertaining to opportunities and challenges of feminist donor priorities. Responses were first decontextualized, scanned for references related to thematic priorities across the interview transcripts. Quotes and examples were extracted from across the transcribed interviews to recontextualize the data into a new thematic schema focussing on perceptions of these donor priorities in relation to women's empowerment and project implementation. The analytical framework is based on intersections between underlying central features of transnational feminism and the key elements of the FIAP. Respondents' perceptions and views of feminism were part of a broader study focussed on the impact of international volunteers in supporting gender equality and women's empowerment in the Global South.

Findings

Based on the analysis from data collected in Malawi, Uganda, and Kenya, overall findings demonstrate that staff at partner organizations see feminist approaches to development as potentially beneficial to them in terms of furthering their own efforts in supporting gender equality. However, perceptions of feminist development range between full acceptance and recognition of a feminist approach (and subsequent feminist assistance policy), partial acceptance with certain stipulations, and negative or problematic perceptions of feminism as a means to disempower men and boys. While these perceptions do not reflect the actual texts of the policy, they do reflect the interpretation of the policy at the partner country level and reveal the potential for future challenges in partnership relations between Canadian and overseas organizations. In spite of the FIAP's emphasis on a rights-based approach and centring of gender equality, these varying perceptions offer insights into the potential effectiveness of the FIAP, how partnerships facilitate context-specific transformative development, and the ways in which integrating a transnational feminist lens may contribute to addressing the underlying tensions due to the ambiguities and shortcomings in the policy. This next section presents the analysis of the data collected. In particular, this analysis reveals the potential for transformative change through partnership relations that are firmly grounded in a transnational feminist approach.

The following section breaks down the discussion into main categories of analysis: respondents who were in full support of feminism and development programming that centred on gender equality, respondents who expressed concerns over ongoing, poorly planned projects that do not address underlying structural issues, and respondents who altogether rejected the idea of feminist aid and saw it as disempowering men and boys while radicalizing women and girls. In Malawi, 40% of respondents expressed support for a feminist policy, while 60% expressed concerns over the emphasis on feminism, but were generally in support of efforts towards gender equality and women's empowerment. In Kenya, 60% of respondents were in favour of feminist development, 87% were aware of some of its

benefits, and 40% were more likely to adopt approaches in their own work. In Uganda, all organizations were in favour of further supporting programming centred on gender equality and women's empowerment. More specifically, 85% of organizations were in favour of a feminist foreign policy, while 15% saw the use of the term feminist as problematic. The data points to possibilities for the FIAP to support transformative development programming through additional future partnerships that develop a transnational feminist approach to the policy.

Perceptions of women's empowerment without a mention of feminist development

Most respondents were generally positive about addressing women's empowerment and gender equality and saw this as benefiting everyone. At the same time, the interconnection between feminist development and challenges around gender equality and women's empowerment was not always perceived as mutually exclusive. Organizations involved in the study could be committed to supporting gender equality without necessarily identifying as a feminist organization. Similarly, feminist organizations may not fully address gender equality, for example, by excluding men's and boys' perspectives and experiences or LGBTQ rights. Findings from the interviews point to these subtle discrepancies. For example, a male staff respondent from Malawi explained how they saw women's empowerment as a way to open up opportunities for both men and women to benefit economically, and that cultural norms often limit their possibilities:

Our culture, our society it has burdened the women, you know most of times there may be other things that women can also do but they can't do because they are raised in a culture whereby they would say that this is for men. So yah if we can empower women for me it's something that will transform the world.

Others mentioned that women's empowerment could positively benefit familial relationships. A male respondent noted that familial relationships positively impacted the income and stability of the household:

There were men who had two or three wives, famous men. I noticed that their affinity was leaning towards the wife who had started doing oil business because she would never bother them asking for money to buy groceries and so forth. So those little things then, they relieved people to some extent. So when a woman is economically empowered, life changes.

There was no explicit mention of a feminist approach in these initiatives but rather an emphasis on empowerment and gender equality. A majority of respondents across all three countries shared similar acceptance without a particular reference to feminism. Organizations involved in gender equality and women's

empowerment saw the FIAP as a means for further support to what they were already doing:

So a policy on girls and women is what we as an organization are doing already, that's our focus, that's our priority so I wouldn't say anything negative on such policies because it's our interest as well. It's really true it is empowerment of girls and young women to bring change in the communities or even in the families or communities that they are in.

The FIAP and a focus on the rights of women and girls were seen to strengthen and build on existing capacities of organizations to conduct their work.

I think it's just understanding that [women's rights are human rights] and that if society leaves one group of people to lag behind too long, society will find itself at a disadvantage and that if we are to embrace quality, we have to see that it's not that bad. It's not actually that bad to have to think of your wife, your sister or your daughter or your mother as being equal to you.

While the support of development policies that highlight gender equality and women's empowerment were seen by both male staff and female staff as progress made towards addressing social and economic inequalities, there was no direct reference to addressing the underlying structural issues beyond access to resources or boosting household income. More specifically, potential benefits of programmes that target women and girls were described only in general terms in the interviews rather than in ways that demonstrate long-term systemic changes, such as establishing quotas for male-dominated sectors or offering support for child care that could support women's economic development pursuits outside the home.

Perceptions of feminist aid and Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment on perpetuating poor project implementation

Several respondents pointed to challenges in current programming that reinforce or centre their efforts on women and girls without looking at other social, economic, and cultural concerns. For example, a project on green energy attempted to ease the burden of women and girls who collected wood by including other sources of electricity. Concerning this project, one respondent pointed to the social obligations placed on women and girls on sourcing fuel that would simply transfer the responsibility of collecting wood to the other sources of energy identified in the intervention, without addressing unequal labour divisions, social norms, and sensitivities.

For example we are implementing this green and inclusive energy project and we are saying women (by virtue of their gender roles) they have to go and ensure that families have got food. They need energy, . . . and they have to go to the forest to seek the wood . . . And we are saying if there is a power blackout, it means that it's the woman

who is to think of alternative energy sources for the family . . . We are saying that the girl child is also helping the mother at the household level to fetch water whilst maybe the boy child is busy reading books and will be able to excel in math and sciences and the end result would notice disparities from the beginning.

Respondents referred to the discrepancies in accessing education in other ways, for example, the need to emphasize reproductive rights to keep girls in schools throughout the year.

If we don't do things with gender perspective and understand that yes we have our differences but at the same time if I don't have sanitary towels then at that point in time the boy is one step ahead of me because if they taught fractions in school that week, unless the teacher understands that 'ok she had a period so let me go and teach her', the girl will lag behind.

Some respondents also expressed both support and concern over a feminist policy, recognizing the need for supporting women, but also saw it as having a negative impact on men and boys in their community. For example, a female staff member from Kenya supported a feminist approach but was also concerned that boys and men might be omitted in these efforts:

My kind of feminism is: every woman has the right to do what she wants. So as a feminist if you are the type of woman who has decided you want to be a stay at home and whatever, I am not supposed to make you feel bad for your choice. . . . feminism is you do not step on other women for their choices. Being a feminist means threatening men's jobs, threatening the male structure in society. The women who enforce patriarchy . . . feminism means them losing their prestige of being the good woman and all that.

However, one-third of the respondents were in favour of a feminist assistance policy provided there was further clarification and open dialogue on what a feminist approach to development entails in their own cultural and social setting.

In recognizing the shortcomings, respondents suggested that further dialogue and discussion was needed around what constitutes feminism in their own lives, how a feminist approach can be accepted by both men and women in their community, and how it could be potentially more effective. Respondents who identified with a transnational perspective of feminism from the Global South in both defining feminism and implementing feminist approaches saw only limited opportunities to learn and understand feminism in their context and from their own communities. In Kenya, a female staff member said,

I think that's one of the biggest gaps we have: people are not allowed to speak freely or question the cause . . . like my aunties who are older . . . I understand how women have been stepped on or the lack of empowerment [and] I want to be part of the cause.

These respondents shared their concerns that an effective implementation process requires a more inclusive and transnational interpretation of feminism:

So when we have open forums where: 1. we allow for questions that are challenging ideas, and 2. we accept everyone's definition of feminisms whatever it is to them. When we are able to accept that, that's where [I see] the opportunities for me . . . in the dialogue.

Critical responses to the FIAP

Critical responses from all three countries pointed to concerns over the disempowerment of men and boys as a result of programming focussed on women and girls. A staff member from Kenya pointed to observations in school enrollment and menial jobs:

If you look at most of the public universities, colleges, there are a lot of girls as compared to men. And if you look at this *Jua Kali* [casual/manual] kind of work by the road side as in jobless zones or corners you will find more men, but now girls are now in class studying because they were empowered.

Other respondents saw feminist development as contributing to a breakdown in familial relations and creating more inequalities between men and women. For example, in Kenya, a female staff member emphasized the importance of men and women working together towards economic empowerment and pointed to concerns over exclusionary reactions:

The thing about Kenya is that men always feel like women are trying to fight them so when you give them the positions and tell them, we can't make it without you guys, we kind of need your advice, your support so that togetherness will help. But if the women are like "men we got this, we are going [to] make this happen without you" it doesn't go so far, they will achieve some things, but they may be shut down by men. So, I feel, let's just work together as much as we need to really lift the woman in Kenya. Let's also try to involve the men so that they feel like they are also involved in this.

More than 50% of respondents across all three countries expressed some concern that feminist development or that gender equality and women's empowerment programming did not benefit, and rather hindered, the future livelihoods of men and boys. The aforementioned quotation suggests there is a common acceptance of the need to address inequalities that women face but this acknowledgement is accompanied by concerns over exclusionary attitudes perpetuated by misinterpretation of feminism. These perceptions exemplify the gaps and misconceptions around the FIAP.

Conclusions

Further attention to perceptions of equality within particular settings could help to guide development programming that is inclusive of men and boys and also of diverse male and female livelihoods. How these kinds of perceptions are received and considered both in the implementation process and facilitation of relevant partnerships between Canadian and overseas organizations risks further polarization and counter-productive outcomes for the policy and for aid relations between Canada and other countries. At the same time, as Global Affairs looks to the future implementation of the policy, there remain opportunities to demonstrate consultative processes that directly respond to underlying power relations and discrimination resulting from intersectional factors that the FIAP aims to address.

These opportunities have direct implications for how accountability is measured under the FIAP and how its financial allocation and policy requirements are communicated and agreed upon in programme and project agreements with Global Affairs. Organizations with mandates centred on gender equality or women's rights organizations are well positioned to smoothly align with—and advance—feminist principles of the FIAP. However, fully realizing the diversity and inclusivity of organizational mandates, capacities, and social norms at play globally requires attention and thoughtful responses to how feminism is perceived, interpreted, and lived in different regions.

The lack of a definition for feminism in the FIAP, combined with the lag time in communicating a strategy for implementation, underscores several of its limitations. A closer look at transnational feminism and the integration of feminist methodology to development suggests that inclusive development requires procedures, resources, and guidance that align with overseas partners' diverse perspectives and contexts. Large investments into women's organizations is a promising step towards addressing underlying structural barriers specific to a particular sector or regional context. At the same time, further emphasis on the intersectional considerations could broaden the emphasis to include boys and men but also those most marginalized and affected by other factors, including race, gender identities, and ethnicity. Ongoing consultation and emphasis on collaborations between organizations based in Canada and in the Global South could be a promising step towards realizing transformative development through a transnational feminist approach.

Overall, the FIAP is a promising policy that emphasizes gender equality and women's empowerment as central to addressing priority areas in development. Future opportunities for Global Affairs Canada to support transformative development could be demonstrated in inclusive implementation processes—processes that are guided by transnational perspectives obtained through a consultative process. What is needed is to integrate spaces and resources for inclusive dialogue around transnational feminism, to enable diverse voices to formulate and own their approach to addressing inequalities, and to ensure that funding and technical

and human resources are in place to truly realize a feminist, intersectional approach to aid.

The research findings presented here offer a glimpse into some of the perspectives on the FIAP and feminist foreign assistance from a selection of partner organizations. The interview participants, however, work for organizations that have some level of commitment to gender equality work through their programming efforts and previous donor engagement activities. Their points of view on feminist foreign aid priorities is important because they provide insight into the local context and informed analyses of gender equality and feminist conceptualizations in their communities. However, they may not reflect the range of views on feminist principles held across different communities, organizations, sectors, or influential individuals in the country. Additional research on perceptions of feminist foreign policy and programming is needed to consider the range of opportunities for feminist foreign aid programming, including the barriers to implementing transformational feminist programmes and the role and influence of gatekeepers who may limit the effectiveness of gender equality programming efforts.

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