

How FIAP Broke Glass Ceilings in Canadian Diplomacy - And Should Go Further

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This paper offers an informed perspective amid growing skepticism about foreign aid and as Canada embarks on a review of its foreign policy. It draws on my experience as a Canadian diplomat, including as High Commissioner to Bangladesh, Ambassador to Panama, and as team lead for the GAC research team which helped analyze the inputs used to formulate the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP).

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I. Is Feminist Foreign Policy Still Relevant in Today's Polycrisis World?

We live in unsettling times marked by global conflict, climate emergencies, authoritarianism and inequality — compounded by the unravelling of the postwar neoliberal order. In this “polycrisis” context, the tendency toward isolation, protectionism and militarization is understandable. Yet, it is precisely at this time that Canada must assert itself as a global advocate for democracy, human rights and inclusion.

At a glance...

- In 2017, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) redefined its international assistance through a gender equality (GE) lens. The Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) was a deliberate choice to drive transformation and social change.
- I believe that FIAP has been conceptually cutting-edge, innovative in its formulation, and audacious both in its targets and commitments.
- From the outset, FIAP was transformative by embedding notions of power relations, gender equality and a human rights based approach into Canada's international assistance (IA) policy.
- FIAP's formulation was unusually participatory.
- FIAP fundamentally changed the way Canada focused, targeted and funded International Assistance.
- Despite its transformative vision and multiple contributions, the FIAP/FPP has not yet realized its full potential. To go further, I recommend four strategic directions:
 1. Institutionalize and Expand Policy Coherence
 2. Engage New Players, Especially in the Global South
 3. Be Better Knowledge Brokers, Learners and Storytellers
 4. Reframe FIAP/FPP Around Current Global and National Canadian Interests



In 2017, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) redefined its international assistance through a gender equality (GE) lens. The Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) was a deliberate choice to drive transformation and social change. Although the policy has faced criticism—for being overly vague and diffused, and for smacking of Western “moral overreach”,¹ FIAP signaled a bold new direction. Auditor General Karen Hogan’s 2023 Report to Parliament further critiqued GAC for failing to demonstrate outcomes.² Some foreign policy experts have suggested abandoning FIAP altogether in order to depict a stronger Canada at this critical juncture.³

However, based on newly-emerging research⁴ and drawing from firsthand experience, I believe that FIAP has been conceptually cutting-edge, innovative in its formulation, and audacious both in its targets and commitments. Despite a short time span and implementation difficulties faced during the COVID pandemic, FIAP has achieved significant development results, particularly by strengthening southern women’s rights organizations (WROs) which have in turn challenged established norms, policies and the status quo. Equally important, although rarely captured by project audits, both FIAP and the broader Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) have broken glass ceilings and moved the needle in the way Canada engages globally, not just in development, but also in diplomacy, security, trade, and consular affairs.

II. FIAP’s Significant Development Results:

A Conceptual Breakthrough

From the outset, FIAP was transformative by embedding notions of power relations, gender equality and a human rights based approach into Canada’s international assistance (IA) policy. The more comprehensive Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP), although, regrettably, never explicitly adopted, was even more groundbreaking by incorporating

intersectionality dimensions into the policy, including sexual orientation and gender identity.⁵ But what truly set FIAP/FFP apart was its explicit linkage between GE and poverty reduction—grounded in new evidence demonstrating that women are more likely than men to invest in their children’s well-being and that supporting their education, health and security, positively impacts growth and poverty reduction.⁶

Innovative Consultations and Evidence Use

FIAP’s formulation was unusually participatory. It involved 300 consultations across 165 Missions, multiple government departments, civil society and international partners. Innovative consultations tools used included SDG games, youth fora, “Politics in the Pub” discussions, and engagement with 3000 Tanzanian Farmers via *Farm Radio International*.⁷ Over 10,000 public submissions were gathered in a FIAP database and reviewed by 20 working groups comprising 200 GAC officials, thus departing from GAC’s traditionally top-down policy approach.

Bold Commitments and Investments

FIAP fundamentally changed the way Canada focused, targeted and funded International Assistance. FIAP introduced focus to Canada’s historically dispersed foreign aid priorities. The Policy also represented a major breakthrough by effectively combining Gender Equality (GE) mainstreaming with measurable GE Targets.⁸ According to International Development Minister Sajjan’s response to the Auditor General’s Report, by 2023, 99% of Canadian IA assistance met GE targets and development initiatives specifically targeting GE increased six-fold since 2015.

Putting its money where its mouth is, Canada has committed over \$3.5 Billion towards GE programs, including \$170.4 million for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) in 2021--up from \$41 Million in 2015. At the 2018 G7 Summit Canadian leadership was

essential in securing \$3.8 billion for women's and girls' education through the *Charlevoix Declaration*.

Flagship Programs with Tangible Development Results

On top of quantitative targets, GAC created two FIAP flagship programs--*Women, Voice and Leadership* (WV&L received \$193 million over two phases) and *The Gender Equality Fund* (GF was granted \$300 million over an unprecedented 15 year period). Together, these funds have strengthened over 6,200 southern WROs which have, in turn, challenged patriarchal policies and practices in multiple ways. This includes, for example:⁹

- *Strengthening Southern WROs, Regional and Global Networks:*

e.g., The GF supported the regional *Red Latinoamericana de Defensoras de Los Derechos Sociales y Ambientales* and southern women's participation in the *26th UN Climate Change Conference* in Glasgow and the *2023 We Deliver Conference* in Kigali;

- *Protecting The Rights of Marginalized Groups:*

e.g., WV&L and the *centre d'étude et de coopération internationale* (CECI) helped disabled women's organizations advocate for improved access to social services in Haiti where the 2010 earthquake left over 6,000 persons newly disabled. Through the *Manusher Jonno Foundation*, the WV&L in Bangladesh supported WROs advocating for an Anti-Discrimination Bill that protects disabled persons, including women and marginalized ethnic minorities, Dalit and transgender persons. Through the GF, WROs in Kenya have advocated for improved access to psychological counselling services by stigmatized victims of female genital mutilation;

- *Enabling Women's Participation in Male Dominated Professions and Domains:*

e.g., Co-Water worked with local GE experts to increase women's leadership roles in the National Police in Haiti; while the *Halo Trust* and *Lawyers Without Borders* collaborated with peace advocates to expand women's roles in demining efforts in Colombia;

- *Mobilizing Resources for Women's Entrepreneurship and Climate Change Contributions:*

e.g., FinDev's *EcoEnterprises Fund* prioritized investing in biodiversity enterprises that promote gender parity in senior management positions;

- *Legislation and Policies For Women's Equality:*

e.g., Through GAC's Technical Assistance Program, Canada's Justice Department helped local experts draft anti-stalking legislation in Mexico, Costa Rica and Kazakhstan.

III. Impacts Beyond ODA: How FIAP Broke the Glass Ceiling in Canadian Diplomacy:

As High Commissioner in Bangladesh, I witnessed firsthand how, between 2022-2023, Canada played a catalytic role advancing the implementation of UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (WPS).¹⁰ Canadian leadership included hosting high-profile events such as the UN Peacekeeping Preparatory Meeting on Women in Peacekeeping (in June 2023), as well as collaborating closely with figures like Brigadier General Krista Brody and WPS Ambassador Jacqueline O'Neill during their respective visits to Bangladesh to champion senior roles for women in the military and accelerated WP&S National Action Plan (NAPs) implementation. In parallel, Canada supported research on Bangladesh's NAPs implementation with the University of Dhaka and funded the construction of women peacekeepers barracks at Bangladesh's Peacekeeping Training Centre through the *Elsie Initiative*.¹¹ Clearly, the combined influence of

policy support, networks, research, communication tools, and funding leveraged through FIAP/FFP enabled us to sustain whole-of-government policy dialogue in the security sphere which would have been otherwise unattainable.

In trade, progress remains uneven but results are emerging. After the 2010 Rana Plaza accident, GAC teamed up with Canadian brands to support International Labour Organization efforts to improve factory safety in Bangladesh. This work continues today, but, in collaboration with Economic and Social Development Canada and both Canadian and Bangladeshi unions, this work has evolved to include women's rights to unionize and report incidents of sexual harassment in the factories. This is not to say that policy coherence is easy or always successful but, the alignment of GE expertise, and networks, has enabled us to bring stakeholders with divergent interests to the table to address difficult issues.

In Consular affairs which are by nature extremely sensitive, feminist principles, policy cover, local networks and expert advice have proven invaluable in supporting Canadian missions to assist Canadian women involved in sexual harassment or forced marriage situations abroad.

In addition, Canada has led globally by launching the G7 Gender Equality Advisory Council which continues to this day; by integrating GE into major Free Trade agreements (including the Canada-US-Mexico Free Trade Agreement and the Comprehensive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) and Foreign Investment Protection frameworks; by carrying out high-profile Women-led Trade Missions (to Taiwan, Japan and the US); and by mandating Gender-Based (GBA+) training and Gender-lens budgeting in all Government departments.

Although less obvious to the public, Canadian diplomacy has changed fundamentally from within.

Since 2018, half of Canadian Heads of Missions have been women, including first time female Ambassadors to the US, China, Russia and five G7 countries. Thanks to critical mass, the *Canadian Women's Ambassadors Network* now mentors female diplomats in overcoming exclusionary practices through networking, training and peer-to-peer support. By “walking the talk”, GAC is transforming its organizational culture and empowering the next generation.

IV. Moving Forward in Turbulent Times:

Despite its transformative vision and multiple contributions, the FIAP/FFP has not yet realized its full potential. To go further, I recommend four strategic directions:

1. Institutionalize and Expand Policy Coherence

Instead of abandoning FIAP/FFP, it would be more strategic to build on its results to date and to implement the policy in a more coherent, coordinated and systematic manner, including its audacious intersectional dimensions. Beyond GBA+ training, limited guidance has been provided and few organizational incentives, accountability mechanisms, planning, monitoring and evaluation tools have been put in place. A coherent and comprehensive implementation of the policy across Mission programs, departments, and with external partners will require Mission-wide action plans, sector-specific strategies with trackable measures of progress, multi-program monitoring and evaluation, and robust success indicators embedded directly into all employee performance evaluations. The Policy's uneven and fragmented implementation largely explains GAC's “aggregation conundrum” and difficulty explaining how, for example, Missions' political advocacy work (e.g., Annual 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence advocacy campaigns) relate to Mission's development work (e.g., Projects specifically aimed at combatting child marriage) or to the technical

assistance provided by other government departments (e.g., ESDC's expert advice to improve access to sexual harassment reporting mechanisms by garment workers).¹²

2. Engage New Players, Especially in the Global South

Advancing toward a cohesive implementation of FIAP/FFP will also require opening up the tent much further to newly-emerged development actors, including middle income countries who have themselves become donors, well-endowed global foundations, innovative private sector interlocutors engaged in corporate social responsibility, and broad-based coalitions and social movements committed to global activism. As part of this process, Canadian NGOs will also need to change by moving beyond project-level or sector-specific work; and by expanding their expertise in growing areas of interest such as innovative financing, the trade-development nexus, the security-development continuum, or developmental applications of artificial intelligence, just to name a few. Above all else, leadership must shift to southern partners who need flexibility to take risks and innovate and funding specifically earmarked towards building south-south networks and broad-based advocacy coalitions which have been demonstrated to have transformative development and policy impacts.¹³

3. Be Better Knowledge Brokers, Learners and Storytellers

Similarly, we need to demonstrate to its detractors and resisters of social change that FIAP/FFP's impact is greater than the sum of the parts. This will require streamlining data collection, strengthening communities of practice, and consistently enhancing knowledge-sharing across programs and with external partners world-wide.¹⁴

To address this, GAC should expand its GE specialist

cadre across all domains, while at the same time liberating them from increased briefing and coding to focus much more on feminist evaluation and capturing FIAP's/FFP's more comprehensive outcomes.

Within the international community at large, we need to directly invest in our partners' training, and learning efforts, including to forge stronger knowledge-sharing between academics and practitioners both in Canada and internationally, in the Global South.

Together, we must become better storytellers so as to effectively communicate development results and engage Canadians--especially youth--in defining and shaping Canada's future role in the world.

4. Reframe FIAP/FFP Around Current Global and National Canadian Interests

At this time of growing inequality and polarization Canadians must champion democracy, human rights and inclusion, as well as make the case for the proven effectiveness of foreign aid and an intersectional feminist foreign policy. Beyond moral imperatives, there is a strong economic case to be made for FIAP/FFP: GE drives growth and poverty reduction. Unfortunately, FIAP/FFP risks being derailed by critics who frame it as too "progressive" or "Western", even as trends such as increased militarization and extractivism escape similar scrutiny.

Canadian international Assistance should not be seen as charity or as separate, but rather as integral to Canada's national and foreign policy interests. There will, inevitably, always be conflicting agendas but the reason FIAP/FFP makes a difference is because it challenges the status quo. Its most important role lies in shifting the conversation towards rights, transformation, and justice—principles that should never go out of date.

1 - See the Final Report for the “Finding Canada’s Place in a Disordered World” Conference, organized by AmbCanada and the CIPS held at the University of Ottawa. Ottawa, Canada, May 12, 2025.

2 - Office of the Auditor General, International Assistance in Support of Gender Equality - Global Affairs Canada. Report 4 to Canadian Parliament. February 2023. Ottawa, Canada.

3 - See “Moving the Needle: Re-imagining Canada’s Development and Humanitarian Engagement”. Report Summary from focus groups convened by NPSIA at Carleton University. Ottawa, Canada. May 16 Draft , 2025.

4 - See “What Future for Canada’s FIAP? Insights From Latin America and the Caribbean” by Stephen Baranyi, Jody-Ann Anderson, Safo Musta, and Nancy Saint Louis, CIPS Blog uOttawa, June 6, 2025.

5 - See Rebecca Tiessen, “What’s New About Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy: The Problem and Possibilities for More of the Same”. The School of Public Policy Publications. uCalgary . Volume 12: 44. December 2019; And Erin Aylward and Stephen Brown, “Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Canada’s Feminist International Assistance.” International Journal. Volume 75, Number 3, (2020).

6 - According to the latest research, if women participated in the economy under the same conditions as men, global GDP would be 26% greater. Conversely, there is evidence showing that gender-based violence costs countries 2% of their annual GDP due to loss of productivity, health and legal costs. For sources on the links between GE and poverty reduction, see the World Bank, UNICEF, and The Kinsey Global Institute.

7 - As part of FIAP’s global consultations, the Canadian NGO, Farm Radio International, used local radio programs and mobile phones to directly ask Tanzanian farmers about their development priorities. See: Kevin Perkins, “Farm Radio’s Contributions to the IAR”. Au Courant Journal. GAC, Ottawa. February 2017.

8 - FIAP set a target of 80% of Canada IA as “integrated” GE and 15% of IA programs as “targeted GE.” See: Canada’s Feminist International Assistance Policy. Ottawa, Canada. 2017.

9 - See: GAC, Renewal of Women’s Voice and Leadership: What We Heard Report. Ottawa, Canada, April 2023; GAC’s 2023 Formative Evaluation of the Partnership for GE, April 2024. Ottawa, Canada; And, E.T. Jackson, “A Journey of Purpose: Gender Lens Investing for Climate Change and Renewable Energy: Findings presented to the Canadian High Commission in Dhaka, Bangladesh. October 3, 2023; See also Baranyi et al, Op. Cit.

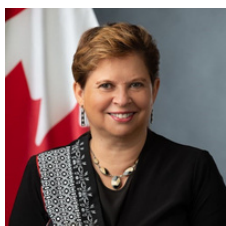
10 - Canada strongly promoted UN Resolution 1325 which recognized the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and girls and reaffirmed the key role of women in peace and security efforts.

11 - The Elsie Initiative for Women in Peace Operations is a multilateral initiative launched by the Canadian Government in 2017 to increase the meaningful participation of women in UN Peacekeeping Missions.

12 - For an analysis of FIAP’s difficulties achieving coherence, see Gloria Novovic, “Fit for Feminism? Examining Policy Capacity for Canada’s Feminist Foreign Policy”. Canadian Foreign Policy Journal. June 26, 2024.

13 - For additional analysis of the links between women’s movements and deeper development and GE results, see the work of Simon University Professor, Laurel Weldon.

14 - The recent joint GAC-IDRC call for proposals which is focused on the creation of a southern-led global and regional hubs, as part of the second face of the WVL, is definitely going in the right direction. See <https://www.idrc-crdi.ca> “Call for Proposals: Global Learning Hub for the Women’s Voice and Leadership.” Ottawa, Canada, June 2025.



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