

Reflecting on the Future of the Feminist International Assistance Policy

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With Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in its third year, CCIC hosted a diverse panel to support stock-taking reflections in June 2020. Gathering insight from the Government, civil society, and academia, panelists highlighted FIAP achievements. Civil society pointed at the persisting gaps of institutional support for gender equality and the need for a coherent feminist foreign policy integrating diplomatic, trade, peacekeeping, and international assistance efforts.

In 2017, Canada launched the [Feminist International Assistance Policy \(FIAP\)](#), an ambitious framework guided by the principles of human rights and feminist values of social, political, economic and environmental justice. The roll-out has included action area policies released in 2019, key performance indicators and a range of funding commitments across sectors to realize women's rights and empowerment, including through support to local women's rights organizations.

Ensuring the lessons from the initial stage of FIAP are captured, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) has carried out an internal stocktaking exercise. Canadian civil society organizations (CSOs), on their end, recently completed [an analysis of the initial roll-out of the Women's Voice and Leadership Program](#), a flagship FIAP component, and an examination of the [organizational and human resource capacity among CSOs for addressing gender equality](#).

As the world responds to the COVID-19 pandemic, Canada's feminist leadership emerges as increasingly needed to promote a recovery grounded in solidarity, equity, human rights, and sustainable development. To reflect on the lessons learned by the Government and Canada's CSOs, as well as map out key areas of focus in the upcoming years of the policy implementation, the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) hosted an inclusive panel during its annual Cooperation Forum. Taking place on June 8, 2020, the session gathered over 200 government, civil society and academic representatives. The session was moderated by Anne Delorme, the coordinator of the Comité québécois femmes et développement (Quebec Committee on Women and Development - CQFD) and the "gender in practice" community of practice at the Association québécoise des organismes de coopération internationale (Quebec Association for International Cooperation Organizations -AQOCI). The list of panellists included:

- Garrett Pratt, Deputy Director, International Assistance Policy Coordination Division, Global Affairs Canada
- Sandeep Prasad, Executive Director, Action Canada for Sexual Health and Rights
- Samantha McGavin, Asia Team, Inter Pares
- Sheila Rao, PhD, International Development Research Consultant/Lecturer, Carleton University

The opening panel was followed by a questions and answers component and six virtual break-out sessions (in English and French) discussing:

- the importance of continued and expanded support for sexual and reproductive health and rights through FIAP and throughout the COVID-19 response,
- opportunities and bottlenecks in CSOs for integrating gender equality into their organizational structures and practice, and
- lessons emerging from feminist partnerships and programming.

This note summarizes the variety of perspectives and analysis that participants raised concerning the implementation of the Policy.

Reflections on three years of FIAP implementation

Global Affairs Canada overview

Canada's FIAP is a result of inclusive and comprehensive consultations with the sector, the public and other state actors who have identified the feminist lens of inclusivity, responsiveness and transformative action as needed to achieve progress across Canada's priority areas. GAC's most recent [report on Canada's international assistance for the fiscal year 2018/2019](#) reflects some of the early results of FIAP: 95 percent of Canada's international assistance now integrates gender considerations or directly addresses gender inequality.

The FIAP is implemented through strategic investments, such as [Her Voice, Her Choice](#) and [Women's Voice and Leadership](#) programs, advancing sexual and reproductive health and rights and women's empowerment and decision-making respectively. The roll-out of key performance indicators has better enabled GAC to provide data on the results of the policy at an aggregate level. For example, as a result of Her Voice, Her Choice, over 2.8 million women and girls received access to sexual and reproductive health services, including modern methods of contraception. Over 160,000 peacekeepers have been trained on protection against sexual exploitation and abuse.

The Government of Canada has continued to roll out new initiatives to implement the policy, such as the [Charlevoix Declaration on Quality Education for Girls, Adolescent Girls and Women in Developing Countries](#), adopted in June 2018 during Canada's G7 presidency, which galvanized global action to address many of the remaining key challenges to dismantling the barriers to and improving the quality of girls' and women's education and skills training. GAC's internal stocktaking exercise confirmed that most commitments are on track, and while COVID-19 threatens development progress and gender equality, the FIAP's action areas and its feminist approach remain more relevant than ever.

Civil society analyses of early FIAP implementation

The FIAP's feminist objectives require fundamental shifts in the structures and systems of Global Affairs Canada. Civil society, on their end, has been called to strengthen their own institutional capacity to both promote and integrate gender equality. The department is continuously challenged to ensure more flexible and integrated approaches to programme delivery, consult civil society and integrate feminist principles through its internal processes as well as its external partnerships and programming. Many of these changes are fundamental institutional shifts expected to outlast FIAP itself; however, given the

structural nature of many of FIAP's ambitions, the effective impact of this policy framework will emerge more clearly through a longer time frame.

Future challenges of FIAP implementation from the CSO perspective

FIAP commitments stand as particularly relevant in the current context of COVID-19, which has exacerbated gender inequality and undermined vital feminist initiatives organized in 2020 to mark 25 years of key global frameworks such as the [Beijing Platform for Action](#). Civil society expressed appreciation for Canada's commitment to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and the 10-year timeframe for investments in this area. Canada's commitment, both in terms of resource allocation for essential SRHR services and in the form of Canada's normative leadership on the global stage, stands as a key pillar in contrast with the global gag rule and other regressive policies.

Despite these investments, [47 million women are unable to access contraception](#), as gender equality advancements are threatened by the current pandemic. A strategic and unwavering approach is needed from Canada. As the [Future Planning Initiative](#) shows, a more coherent feminist foreign policy, encapsulating international assistance but also diplomacy, trade and security, is required for sustainable and transformative impacts. COVID-19 and its dire consequences of gender-based violence, a rise in female genital mutilation, child rape and other human rights violations require adequate international assistance interventions that prioritize the most marginalized.

Support for feminist movements and institutions

Sustainable and consistent support for women's organizations tackling gender norms and advocating for the rights of girls and women emerges as vital during the pandemic, given these organizations' vulnerability to development funding cuts. These suggestions reflect the findings of recent studies conducted within the sector. The [report](#) CCIC developed in partnership with the Women's Rights Policy Group lists key recommendations for Government support of institutional alignment with FIAP. Recommendations reflect CSOs' need for inclusive and transparent consultations, a re-examination of power relationships with global and local actors, the adequacy of funding, and sufficient attention to institutional and sector-wide learning. The report highlights the need for further resources to support institutional mainstreaming of feminist principles and approaches, especially in the areas of monitoring & evaluation, partnerships, and compliance requirements.

[Chronically underfunded](#), feminist organizations are perpetually asked to innovate, weather complex crises and bolster institutional mechanisms without any substantial resources to do so. Strengthening grassroots women's movements emerges as one of the priorities of [the Generation Equality Forum](#). Women's Voice and Leadership responds to this need for capacity-building and strengthening, but these actors could be more purposefully integrated into other GAC programs as well. To avoid losing ground to the current pandemic, feminist movements and organizations will need to be particularly prioritized in COVID-19 response and a subsequent recovery in order to ensure feminist agendas are meaningfully integrated. [Localization of international assistance has been recognized as a vital principle of feminist intervention](#), which is based on community engagement and equitable partnerships needed for context-informed programming and a critical lens of protection and the accountability to affected populations.

Re-thinking the impacts of feminist international assistance

The FIAP is focused on sustainable and transformative interventions that enable gender equality through shifts in social norms, governance mechanisms and community dynamics that transcend the scope of individual programs or organizational mandates. This kind of impact requires consistency of investments, but also time for such shifts to occur. While the discourse change and priorities that the FIAP introduced have enabled feminist organizations to strengthen their rights-based advocacy and others to re-conceptualize their programming to be more feminist, further efforts to reconceptualize feminist assistance are needed. This is especially true for complex contexts, where a feminist approach would bring much-needed flexibility and consistent support to strengthen community resilience, and more seamlessly integrate humanitarian and development-focused interventions.

This includes more realistic expectations from GAC about the transformative potential of short-term projects of one, two, or even four years. Gender specialists highlighted the often inconsistent application of the Government's gender equality markers, whereby standards for a specific marker depend on the desk officer, a mission, or even the need to meet specific quotas.

Furthermore, organizations are often requested to innovate in order to achieve FIAP objectives, which, however, often stand in contradiction with GAC's strict criteria for international assistance financing. Low overhead ceilings, limited core funding for institutional capacity-strengthening, and budget constraints often hinder organizations' capacity for innovation. For example, commitments to gender-responsive budgeting have largely focused on project direct costs but have not allowed for a re-conceptualization of contribution agreements more broadly.

Publicly available guidance on what each of the gender equality markers require, in terms of institutional resources, budget allocation, and program and project duration would help strengthen FIAP's implementation.

Strengthening monitoring and evaluation of feminist interventions

One of the key challenges expressed by the civil society is reconciling feminist principles with the requirements for clear outcome-focused results. Some of this work requires knowledge translation, through collaboration with technical experts, in order to deconstruct practical applications of key feminist priorities and agree upon action plans and performance indicators. Another good practice is the conceptualization of a feminist framework for monitoring and evaluation at the project design stage, which would allow for a more meaningful analysis of the impact of gender-transformative or gender-responsive programming. One of the key requisites for strengthened FIAP implementation is the training and resources for civil society in the area of feminist monitoring, evaluation and learning. Initiatives by organizations such as [Oxfam international](#), to lead in this area, have been warmly received, alongside a call for government support. This support is particularly vital for smaller and medium organizations without the institutional capacity to invest in external expertise, and in this way strengthen their institutional mechanisms.

Fostering a learning environment for the advancement of feminist international assistance

The initial phase of FIAP implementation has yielded useful lessons, which CSOs suggested should be leveraged through platforms of knowledge sharing and communities of practice. GAC is called upon to create avenues for knowledge-sharing within the department with the goal of advancing more collaborative and intersectional approaches to FIAP. Lastly, the sector recognized the need for including diverse voices in all areas of work, in relation to gender, age, origin, race, nationality and class for example.

Global Affairs Canada institutional alignment with FIAP

The FIAP has resulted in fast-paced, determined and strategic shifts in international assistance programming. Because of the nature and the speed of some of these shifts, civil society at times witnesses institutional discrepancy within GAC. In communication with civil society actors, staff working in High Commissioner Offices and as project team leaders are not always aware of the latest institutional priorities and processes. Improving the consistency in which FIAP is applied, especially during the current pandemic, would have a positive impact on the predictability of the Governments' positions and the ability of the civil society to ensure context-informed programming that is at the same time policy compliant. Institutionalizing feminist principles in all aspects of GAC's work and internal processes would lower the dependency on personal capacities and priorities of civil servants to advance FIAP as a framework.

The importance of a coherent feminist policy

Participants welcomed the FIAP as a meaningful start towards a more coherent feminist foreign policy. Building on the lessons of feminist organizations about the importance of cross-sectoral work and coalition-based synergies, feminist experts are continuing to call for Canada's feminist lens that encapsulates trade, diplomacy, peacekeeping and international development. To allow for transformative efforts and bolster Canada's credibility on the international stage, these elements of a foreign policy must be aligned. Plans for an endeavour of this kind are reflected in the recent announcement of the Minister Champagne about a CSO consultation oriented towards [a feminist foreign policy](#) - a conversation that CSOs have already begun [on social media](#).

Canada's coherent feminist foreign policy would reinforce the work of Canada's missions and its global teams working across various areas of the foreign policy. Such a track record on a global level would expand Canada's role in initiatives geared towards the international support for gender equality more broadly and sexual and reproductive health more specifically. This would result in a more ambitious prioritization of the feminist agenda within multilateral institutions, and greater synergies among like-minded donors. Lastly, a coherent feminist foreign policy would enable Canada to bilaterally identify innovative solutions for gender equality and engage host governments.

Overall, civil society specialists commended determined efforts by GAC to shift its institutional mechanisms towards a feminist approach to international assistance, while engaging the civil society and championing key feminist priorities such as SRHR. Moving forward, the transformative ambition of the FIAP will require more strategic investments in feminist organizations and their capacity to build resilient and equitable societies for us all.