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Five steps to move Canada's feminist development policy forward

With the world watching, Canada's new Feminist International Assistance Policy is a great opportunity — if implementation is done right. Shaughn McArthur outlines five steps to move things along as parliament gets back to business.

[OpenCanada](#)

By Shaughn McArthur



Justin Trudeau appears on stage at the Women in the World Summit in New York, April 6, 2017. REUTERS/Shannon Stapleton

Shortly before Canada's parliament rose in June, the Canadian government topped off a week of foreign policy and defence commitments with the launch of its [Feminist International Assistance Policy](#). The policy establishes the parameters of a made-in-Canada approach that places gender equality and women's empowerment at the centre of its efforts to "reduce extreme poverty and vulnerability around the world."

The timing of the announcement set the stage for a summer of international accolades for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government. From his Coldplay concert [opener](#) at the G20 Summit in Hamburg to this week's appearance alongside Angelina Jolie at the [Women in the World Summit](#), the prime minister has drawn widespread praise for promising to help unleash women and girls' potential to tackle the world's most intractable challenges.

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As parliament returns on September 18 and the halfway mark in the prime minister's mandate approaches, however, pressure is growing for the government to articulate exactly how it will deliver on its ambitious new international assistance agenda.

Form must follow function

The foundation on which the government's policy is built is sound. The [Sustainable Development Goals](#), the [Paris Agreement on Climate Change](#) and a range of other international agreements call on stakeholders to put women and girls at the centre of international development and emergency response efforts. But governments, the United Nations and other international development organizations have long struggled to shake old habits and establish new ways of delivering assistance to ensure no one is left behind.

Despite increasing donor support for gender equality in recent years, for example, bilateral assistance targeting gender equality as a primary objective amounts to just two percent of all aid going to recipient countries' economic and productive sectors — an amount the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [characterized](#) as “a mere drop in the ocean.”

Towards that end, the Canadian government has promised to increase the proportion of its bilateral assistance specifically targeting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls to 15 percent by 2021-22. In addition, at least 80 percent of Canada's bilateral assistance will integrate efforts to support gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Prospects for the government actually being able to reach these levels are reasonably good. But the impact of any such resource re-allocation ultimately depends upon the way Global Affairs Canada (GAC) goes about designing, measuring and evaluating its programs.

On these critical items, the Feminist International Assistance Policy is silent.

A few questions come to mind:

- How will GAC go about fulfilling its Feminist International Assistance Policy commitment to involve local women's organizations in program design, delivery and monitoring of climate change and humanitarian initiatives?
- How will it implement the commitment to collect and use gender- and age-disaggregated data?
- How will GAC hold partners accountable for delivering on their gender commitments, or work with such partners to build their capacity to realize feminist international assistance objectives?
- How will Canada ensure that its trade and military agendas complement, rather than compete against, its vision for “reducing poverty and building a more inclusive, peaceful and prosperous world”?

Doing things differently

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For all its paradigm-shifting character, the Feminist International Assistance Policy lacks clarity on the mechanisms by which it will deliver on its promises.

The [McLeod Group](#) put the challenge facing GAC succinctly: “Becoming fit for purpose will require more than good intentions. It will require major training, new job descriptions, and revised incentives for senior management. Otherwise GAC, instead of applying appropriate analytical tools and receiving sound technical advice related to gender and social analysis, risks falling back on its old formula of ‘just add women and stir.’”

The Feminist International Assistance Policy provides a rare opportunity to transcend old formulas, and to adopt more targeted and localized approaches for tackling remaining injustices at their root. In order for this opportunity to be seized, the Canadian government can continue to build momentum towards the achievement of its international assistance objectives by demonstrating exactly how it is going to do things differently. Immediate and impactful possible interventions could include the following five steps:

1. Publish plans of action.

GAC should continue collaborating with stakeholders to develop and publish action plans detailing how it will go about implementing each of the six action areas identified in the Feminist International Assistance Policy (gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, human dignity, growth that works for everyone, environment and climate action, inclusive governance, peace and security).

Various branches of GAC have begun outlining their approaches for reaching new objectives, but doing things differently has to be about more than tweaking old systems and structures to do more to tackle gender inequality. Living up to the policy’s transformational ambitions will require significant changes in the mechanics by which international assistance is planned and delivered. A new development coordination unit already in place within GAC will be instrumental to these changes, but it remains to be seen how it will manage these changes while supporting implementation in the short term.

2. Align gender policy with increased focus on fragile contexts.

GAC’s [Policy on Gender Equality](#) should be updated to reflect the government’s commitment to promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment in emergency settings. The Feminist International Assistance Policy includes a greater focus on fragile and conflict-affected states, where the share of extreme poor is **expected** to rise from 17 percent of the global total today to almost 50 percent by 2030. But Global Affairs’ Policy on Gender Equality — which outlines how GAC understands and commits to furthering gender equality in its international assistance — remains blind to the needs and agency of women and girls in fragile settings. Greater coherence between these policies could be achieved by introducing amendments to the latter to reflect the critical importance of women’s needs and participation in these contexts.

3. Manage for feminist results.

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Results-based management policy statements and guidelines — which articulate what the government's implementing partners are expected to achieve and measure with taxpayers' money — should be updated. In the context of feminist international assistance, results must be rooted in theories of change aimed at catalyzing long-term shifts in the gender dynamics within a given geographic or institutional context. New measures are needed to strengthen the government's institutional capacity to deliver against new policy objectives.

The establishment of a gender equality hub within Global Affairs Canada, for example, could simultaneously foster cutting-edge, gender-specific programming, while supporting and coordinating gender mainstreaming in other technical areas. Further measures are needed to ensure accountability for gender equality impacts within the context of the [Official Development Assistance Accountability Act](#).

4. Other government departments need to align.

Mechanisms should be established to ensure the objectives of Canadian feminist international assistance and gender-based analysis are reflected and upheld by the policies and initiatives of other departments, including National Defence, Trade, and Environment and Climate Change. The nexus between domestic and international climate change and sustainable development issues, stability and security, clean and inclusive growth, resilience, nutrition and health, and agriculture and food security means that international public policy increasingly requires expertise, technologies and approaches to be shared and coordinated between departments and their respective stakeholder groups.

The government's desire to do more to tackle these challenges without commensurate increases in the international assistance budget only reinforces this need. Having passed up an opportunity to foster inter-departmental coherence through the consultation processes that informed new policy frameworks for each of these departments, the government must now develop new checks and balances to ensure gender equality and development are promoted and not undermined by its international trade, environmental and defence activities.

5. Anticipate the challenges of working with grassroots groups.

Finally, the government should articulate specifically how it plans to work with local women's rights organizations and international organizations alike in planning, decision-making, implementation and accountability for delivery against Canada's feminist international assistance objectives.

The government has committed to delivering more of its assistance in partnership with local women's rights organizations and to promoting their meaningful participation in policy processes and decision-making. This is widely acknowledged to be a key component of feminist policy. But the success of such approaches requires new ways of identifying and working with small organizations. Although such organizations are often best placed to deliver on feminist objectives, for example, many are low profile and lack a track record against which to assess their reliability, or have limited capacity to fulfill standard contractual obligations in areas such as reporting and evaluation.

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Moreover, support to local women-led civil society organizations should seek to empower and raise the ability of such organizations to influence and shape development planning, public perception and public expenditure over the long-term. Working effectively with such organizations requires a decentralization of decision-making to Canadian missions that are more connected to local realities. It also requires greater flexibility in timelines and procedures, to allow for trust, capacity and common understanding to be built, as well as a greater appetite for risk than is typical of government bureaucracies.

The world is watching

The Feminist International Assistance Policy, rather than setting the government on a clear path to implementation, has unleashed what must seem to many accomplished officials within GAC like an almost impossible to-do list. And with the mantra of deliverology within the Prime Minister's Office being as strong as ever, the pressure to show results can but increase with every passing day.

At stake is much more than the success or failure of the Feminist International Assistance Policy or the reputation of Trudeau's feminist government, however. Celebrated for its game-changing potential in international policy circles around the world, any successes and failures in the implementation of the policy could either set positive new precedents for others to follow or lower ambitions for tackling gender inequality and other international challenges.

As Canada prepares to host the G7 in 2018, and continues in its campaign to re-gain a seat on the United Nations Security Council in 2021, the world is watching. Putting the Feminist International Assistance Policy into action, while building robust systems to back it up, is the best way for Trudeau to demonstrate that he is truly committed to a new way of working within the global community, and to ensure this approach is fully entrenched in the architecture of Canadian international assistance for years to come.