

To What Extent Does Canada's Feminist Foreign Policy Reflect Genuine Feminist Principles? A Case Study of Canada's International Assistance to Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) through a Global South lens, considering whether Canada's application of FIAP represents a genuine aid framework or functions instead as a form of political branding. Drawing on Afghanistan as a case study, the paper explores the divide between Canada's rhetoric and its actual practice across three angles. First, it reveals that although Canada has shown humanitarian commitment, its implementation falls short of being sustained or effective, hindered by bureaucratic delays and a move toward instrumentalist feminism that treats women's empowerment as a means to developmental ends rather than a goal in itself. Second, the paper examines how FIAP imposes a Western model of feminism onto Afghanistan, disregarding the ethnic, religious, and geographical realities of Afghan women. Third, it identifies an "aid paradox," pointing to power dynamics — such as Pakistan's regional role and anti-terrorism laws obstructing humanitarian organizations — that undercut the authenticity of Canada's feminist commitments and place national interests above genuine implementation. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates the fragility of FIAP, using the swift collapse following the Taliban's 2021 takeover to illustrate this, while reconsidering what feminism truly entails and exposing the disconnect between a nation's feminist promises and its actual delivery.

INTRODUCTION

The Structural Policy-Practice Gap

In August 2021, following the Taliban's return to power, Afghanistan experienced a rapid reversal of many gains made in women's education, employment, and political participation. The Taliban subsequently restricted girls' access to secondary education, excluded women from universities and many public-sector positions, and imposed increasingly severe restrictions on women's participation in civil

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society and humanitarian organizations (Wilkins, 2024; New Humanitarian, 2022). These developments exposed the fragility of progress that had depended heavily on international funding, external security arrangements, and institutions that were not sufficiently resilient to major political change (Zuercher, 2018; Equality Fund, 2022).

Canada provided more than \$3.9 billion in assistance to Afghanistan between 2001 and 2021, including significant funding directed toward humanitarian assistance and development programming. After 2017, much of Canada's international assistance was presented through the framework of its Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), which identifies gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls as central priorities (Global Affairs Canada, 2017; Cadesky, 2020). However, the reversal of women's rights after 2021 raises an important question about the relationship between feminist policy commitments and their implementation in conditions of political instability. The Office of the Auditor General of Canada found that Global Affairs Canada could not demonstrate how its international assistance had improved outcomes for women and girls and that its monitoring systems often emphasized outputs rather than longer-term outcomes (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2023). The Afghan case therefore provides an important context for examining whether Canada's feminist assistance represents transformative change or remains vulnerable to bureaucratic, geopolitical, and institutional constraints.

This paper asks: *To what extent does Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy reflect genuine feminist principles in its assistance to Afghanistan, and to what extent does its implementation reproduce the limitations of a policy-oriented or branding-based approach to feminism?* It also asks whether Canada's policy sufficiently challenges structural inequalities and responds to the local and diverse contexts of Afghan women. Rather than assuming that FIAP is either wholly genuine or wholly performative, the paper examines the tensions between Canada's stated commitments and the outcomes, institutional practices, and geopolitical choices associated with their implementation.

The analysis proceeds through three interconnected lines of inquiry. First, it examines Canada's commitments and implementation of FIAP in Afghanistan. Although Canada has demonstrated humanitarian commitment, existing evaluations and scholarship identify weaknesses in accountability, monitoring, bureaucratic continuity, and the measurement of long-term outcomes (Cadesky, 2020; Chidwick et al., 2024; Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2023). These weaknesses raise concerns that gender equality may be reduced to measurable outputs rather than pursued as a process of structural transformation (Bell & Wegner, 2025; Tiessen, 2019). Second, the paper analyzes FIAP through intersectional and Global South feminist perspectives. It argues that a policy organized around a generalized category of "women and girls" risks overlooking differences of ethnicity, religion, class, geography, and local political context (Morton et al., 2020). It further considers how feminist interventions can reproduce colonial patterns when they treat women in the Global South primarily as victims requiring external rescue rather than as political actors with their own forms of knowledge, resistance, and agency (Hastrup, 2025; Kurtiş & Adams, 2015; Zhukova, 2025).

Third, the paper examines what it calls the aid paradox: the possibility that assistance intended to advance gender equality can be constrained or undermined by the political and institutional conditions through which it is delivered. In Afghanistan, Canadian humanitarian organizations reported that counter-terrorism restrictions created legal uncertainty around routine expenses, including fuel, rent, and taxes, because such payments could involve the Taliban-controlled authorities (Ahmed & Romaniuk, 2021; Sparks, 2022). These restrictions contributed to the suspension or limitation of work by organizations including World Vision Canada, the Canadian Red Cross, and CARE Canada, while Canadian organizations called for clearer humanitarian exemptions (Sparks, 2022; CBC News, 2023; New Humanitarian, 2023). The Afghan case therefore demonstrates how feminist commitments may be weakened when humanitarian action is subordinated to counter-terrorism rules, institutional risk management, and broader geopolitical priorities.

This investigation is significant for three reasons. First, Canada has presented FIAP as an important expression of its commitment to gender equality and has used feminist language to distinguish its international role from more traditional, security-centered approaches to foreign policy (Chapnick, 2019; Global Affairs Canada, 2017). Examining the gap between this rhetoric and implementation contributes to broader debates about whether feminist foreign policy can transform the structures of international relations or whether it can be absorbed into existing bureaucratic and geopolitical systems (Cadesky, 2020; Scheyer & Kumskova, 2019). Second, Afghanistan is not only a case of humanitarian crisis; it demonstrates how feminist assistance operates within conditions of war, foreign intervention, regional power competition, and authoritarian rule. Studying these conditions helps clarify the limits of applying universal models of gender equality across different social and political contexts. Third, the paper contributes to decolonial and Global South feminist scholarship that calls for greater attention to local agency, intersectionality, and the colonial power relations embedded in international assistance (Haastrup, 2025; Kurtiş & Adams, 2015; Zhukova, 2025).

This paper therefore treats Canada's FIAP commitments not simply as aspirational policy statements but as claims that require evaluation against implementation practices and outcomes. It examines the gap between rhetoric and practice through three analytical lenses: implementation and bureaucracy, intersectionality and decoloniality, and geopolitics. The paper argues that FIAP has produced important forms of humanitarian assistance and institutional progress, but that its implementation remains limited by short-term measurement, weak accountability, insufficient attention to local agency, and the prioritization of geopolitical and legal constraints. Consequently, FIAP risks reproducing the inequalities it claims to challenge unless feminist assistance is accompanied by durable local ownership, structural accountability, and a more sustained challenge to unequal power relations.

Methodologically, the paper uses qualitative document analysis and critical discourse analysis of FIAP policy documents, Canadian government reports, Auditor General findings, humanitarian reporting, and peer-reviewed scholarship on feminist foreign policy and Global South critiques. Primary materials include Global Affairs Canada policy and evaluation documents, Canadian accountability reports, and United Nations and humanitarian reports on Afghanistan. Secondary materials include scholarship on

FIAP, feminist foreign policy, intersectionality, and decolonial feminist theory, including Cadesky (2020), Bell and Wegner (2025), Morton et al. (2020), and Haastrup (2025). Afghanistan functions as a bounded case study through which the paper examines Canada's feminist assistance commitments and implementation from 2001 to 2025.

What is Feminist Foreign Policy?

Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) has emerged in the 21st century as a bold reimagining of international relations - one that places gender equality, women's rights, and the dismantling of patriarchal power at the heart of a nation's global engagement. FFP is a transformative policy framework adopted by states to guide their interactions with both state and non-state actors in ways that prioritise peace, gender equality, and human rights (Thompson et al., 2020; Scheyer & Kumskova, 2019). It challenges the traditional state-centric model of foreign policy that has historically prioritised national security and power politics, shifting the focus instead toward human security, justice, and inclusion (Bester, 2024). FFP seeks to address the structural inequalities that shape international relations by integrating feminist principles into the core of foreign policymaking. FFP mainly redefines foreign policy from being primarily concerned with state security and stability to one that places human well-being at the centre (Whipkey, Ahmed, & Thompson, 2025). This includes the protection of human rights, the pursuit of justice, women's empowerment, equitable access to resources, and both economic and environmental stability. Rather than treating women's issues as a marginal concern, it seeks to embed gender equality across all areas of foreign engagement, including diplomacy, trade, development aid, defence, and climate policy. It aims not only to promote gender equality but also to dismantle systemic injustices such as patriarchy, white supremacy, and colonial hierarchies. In practice, a feminist foreign policy requires governments to ensure that principles of equality and accountability are reflected in both policy design and implementation (Foster & Markham, 2023). By intentionally allocating resources toward feminist priorities, FFP aspires to build a more just and sustainable international order, where peace is defined by the presence of equality and opportunity rather than the mere absence of conflict. (Thompson et al., 2020).

FFP history

In 2014, Sweden's Foreign Minister Margot Wallström announced the world's first explicitly "feminist" foreign policy (FFP). Wallström herself admitted that the initiative was initially greeted with skepticism and even a bit of laughter. It took three years after Sweden's example for another nation to follow suit. In 2017, Canada introduced its own version: a more limited Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP). Momentum slowly grew: Luxembourg's coalition government committed to advancing a feminist foreign policy in 2018, while France updated its International Strategy on Gender Equality that same year, later declaring an explicitly feminist foreign policy in 2019. At the 2019 UN General Assembly, Mexico announced plans for its own feminist approach, which was officially launched in early 2020. Since then, countries such as Spain and Chile have also joined the growing movement towards FFP (Thompson, Ahmed, & Khokhar, 2021)

In June 2017, the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) was launched by the Government of Canada to reposition itself as a global leader on gender equality. To do this, Canada's FIAP prioritised gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at the core of its international assistance programming, framing the policy as both a human-rights and feminist agenda. Additionally, Canada committed to devote their time and resources to foreign policy, trade, defence, development, feminism and the promotion of the rights of women and girls. (Government of Canada, 2017).

FFP is regarded as an increasingly popular approach to embedding gender equality in foreign policy and as discussed above, is currently being practised by states including Sweden (2014), Canada (2017), France (2019), Mexico (2020) and Spain (2021). (U.S. Women's Caucus, n.d.). However, despite its popular uptake, academics and leaders from the Global South argue that FFP is not fully inclusive and falls short of its feminist priorities. For example, African-based feminists critique FFP for reproducing colonialised knowledge hierarchies and failing to sufficiently involve voices from the Global South in its design and implementation (Haastrup, 2025; Zhukova, 2025)

Methods

To investigate this question, this paper employs qualitative document analysis and critical discourse analysis of FIAP policy documents, government reports, and peer-reviewed scholarship on feminist foreign policy and Global South critiques. The analysis draws on primary sources including Global Affairs Canada evaluations, UN reports on Afghanistan, and Auditor General findings, alongside secondary scholarship from feminist scholars including Cadesky (2020), Bell and Wegner (2025), and Trevisani (2024). Afghanistan serves as the bounded case study through which to examine FIAP's rhetorical commitments against implementation outcomes between 2001 and 2025.

Thesis Statement

This essay examines the extent to which Canada's Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) reflects genuine feminist principles through an analysis of its international assistance to Afghanistan. It argues that while Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) demonstrates a strong rhetorical and structural commitment to gender equality, its implementation reveals contradictions between feminist ideals and geopolitical realities particularly when evaluated through the lens of Global South critiques.

This essay will explore this argument by first assessing Canada's feminist commitments in policy and aid delivery. This will be demonstrated by highlighting initiatives that promote women's rights, education, and humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan. Secondly, the essay will examine cultural and intersectional critiques that question whether Canada's approach adequately includes local Afghan women's voices and further analyze how effectively it addresses their diverse realities of gender, ethnicity, and class. Lastly, the essay will analyze the geopolitical constraints of Canada's Feminist Foreign Policy, focusing on the "Aid Paradox" and Pakistan's proxy role in Afghanistan, to show how power politics and dependency can undermine the authenticity of Canada's feminist commitments

CONTEXT

Canada's feminist international assistance policy

In 2017, Canada committed to a new approach to international assistance: the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP). This was a watershed moment in which Canada's global persona took on a "feminist" thematic (Chapnick, 2019). This policy supports the economic, political, and social empowerment of women and girls, and makes gender equality a priority for the benefit of all people. To guide its implementation, FIAP focuses its efforts on six action areas: (1) Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women and Girls; (2) Human Dignity (health and nutrition, education, humanitarian action); (3) Growth that Works for Everyone; (4) Environment and Climate Action; (5) Inclusive Governance; (6) Peace and Security (Government of Canada, 2017).

This essay will primarily examine Actions 1, 2, and 6, which address gender equality, human dignity, and peace and security.

Canada and the Afghanistan crisis

Since the early 1960s, Canada has provided humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan initially in response to a series of natural disasters. In 1968, Canada formally established diplomatic relations with Afghanistan, and, in 2003, opened its Embassy in Kabul and appointed its first resident ambassador. As of August 15, 2021, following the Taliban's take-over of the country, the Government of Canada announced that it had suspended operations at the Canadian Embassy in Kabul. (Government of Canada, 2017).

For years, Canada ranked among the top 10 donors to Afghanistan, providing more than \$3.9 billion from 2001 to August 2021. At least \$179.7 million of that was humanitarian aid sent from 2014 to August 2021. In the final year of the Western occupation, Afghanistan was the second-largest recipient of Canada's international aid. (The New Humanitarian, 2023). However, following the United States government's freezing of Afghanistan's central bank reserves, which many observers criticized for worsening the country's economic collapse, Afghan families faced extreme poverty, with reports of people selling organs or arranging child marriages to survive. During this period, the Canadian government's anti-terrorism laws prevented humanitarian organizations from delivering food and medical aid to the country (Ahmed & Romaniuk, 2021). In one case, Canada blocked a World Vision Canada shipment of therapeutic food that would have fed 1,800 children (Schalk, 2024).

The Taliban's designation as a terrorist organization in Canada has led the Canadian government to instruct NGOs that any transaction resulting in funds reaching the de facto government in Kabul could expose them to prosecution under anti-terrorism legislation that prohibits the financing of terrorism (Tasker, 2023). Routine operational expenses such as purchasing fuel, renting office space, or paying staff taxes all involve payments to the Taliban government. This has made it effectively impossible for major Canadian organisations such as World Vision, the Canadian Red Cross, and CARE Canada to continue their work in Afghanistan (Sparks, 2022). These organisations have repeatedly asked the Canadian

government to include a legal exemption or provide assurances that their humanitarian work will not be subject to prosecution (Tasker, 2023).

Many other countries, including the United States and the United Kingdom, established such exemptions within weeks or months of the Taliban's return to power. Yet, nearly a year after the takeover, Canada still had not introduced a workable solution to allow NGOs to resume operations. (The New Humanitarian, 2022 ; Schalk, 2024)

THE AMBITION AND REALITY OF CANADA'S FFP

Tangible Commitments and Persistent Critiques

Although Canada's approach under the Feminist International Assistance Policy has faced valid criticism, the country has demonstrated clear progress through measurable humanitarian achievements and its dedication to human dignity. With one of FIAP's key focuses being the provision of humanitarian aid, emphasizing the commitment to upholding human dignity, promoting access to essential services such as food, healthcare, and education for vulnerable populations and addressing the urgent needs of displaced and at-risk groups, as evidenced by the resettlement of over 54,700 Afghans since the fall of Kabul as of October 1, 2024. (Public Safety Canada, 2025; Canadian Government, 2017)

However, despite these achievements, veteran-run charities have reported that by 2024/2025 they were unable to even begin the paperwork for Afghans still in danger, as the Canadian immigration system was so backlogged that many applications risked expiring before being processed (Heisler, 2025). The prolonged delays not only exacerbate humanitarian vulnerability but also carry broader foreign policy implications, as Canada risks being perceived, like the United States, as failing to fulfill its obligations to former allies and employees. However, this humanitarian effort is undermined by a bureaucratic reality that betrays feminist ideals: refugees who survived the chaos of Kabul's fall now face extended waits. This gap between the promise of safety and the reality of delay highlights the core contradiction in Canada's policy. averaging more than four years for family reunification, underscoring the urgent need for a specific and expedited process to address this continuing crisis (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2023). Taken together, these gaps suggest that Canada's response, while often highlighted in media and government statements as a major humanitarian success, functions more as a series of short-term "band-aid" measures rather than initiatives producing sustainable, measurable outcomes. Programs celebrating the arrival of tens of thousands of refugees may generate headlines and signal Canada's commitment to feminist humanitarian values, yet the persistent backlogs, paused sponsorship streams, and lack of targeted assistance for at-risk Afghans reveal that the policy's tangible impact on vulnerable populations remains limited. This discrepancy between visible achievements and enduring structural barriers highlights the tension between performative gestures and substantive, long-term change within the Feminist International Assistance Policy framework. (Chidwick, Tuyisenge, DiLiberto, & Schwartz, 2024)

Unstable and Changeable Structure

Canada's feminist aid policy is undermined by an unstable and changeable implementation structure, a direct result of its failure to adopt a truly transformative feminist vision. This structural inconsistency leads to persistent bureaucratic inefficiencies and a marked inability to plan effectively for the complex and shifting political realities that development work inevitably encounters (Cadesky, 2020). At its core, the policy is built on a depoliticized and diluted version of feminism: one that strips away the radical, justice-oriented roots of feminist thought in favor of a more palatable, technocratic approach. It overwhelmingly substitutes the transformative language of feminism with the vague, technical jargon of "gender equality" and "empowerment," terms that, while widely used, often lack clear definitions or actionable substance. These buzzwords are then deployed to instrumentalize women's rights, framing them not as fundamental human rights deserving of investment and protection in their own right, but rather as a means to achieve other external objectives, such as economic growth, national security, or social stability (Trevisani, 2024). This instrumentalization fundamentally compromises the policy's integrity and effectiveness.

As a result, Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) appears rhetorically bold on the surface, filled with aspirational language and progressive-sounding commitments, yet remains operationally hollow in practice. It consistently lacks the concrete implementation strategies, dedicated financial and human resources, and robust accountability mechanisms necessary to drive genuine, systemic change (Lee, 2018). Rather than centering the lived experiences, agency, and leadership of women and marginalized groups in the Global South, FIAP often reduces feminist goals to measurable indicators that serve pre-existing foreign policy or economic agendas. In doing so, it treats women's rights as instrumental tools rather than as intrinsic values and ends in themselves: a dynamic that further entrenches power imbalances rather than dismantling them. Without a deeper commitment to a transformative feminist praxis that challenges structural inequities and centers intersectionality, FIAP risks perpetuating the very systems of inequality it claims to oppose. (Trevisani, 2024).

Feminism as Strategy, Not Transformation

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) presents the idea that when women and girls are empowered, this empowerment will have a cascading effect, helping to address and improve the challenges and issues within their homes, within their local communities, within their countries, and across the broader economic landscape (Trevisani, 2024). However, while this vision of a cascading effect is intuitively appealing, this logic can be seen as an instrumentalist approach that frames women's empowerment primarily as a catalyst for broader development goals rather than an objective in its own right. This framework places the burden of national development on the shoulders of individual women and girls. It suggests that their individual advancement will automatically rectify deep seated systemic issues. This can sidestep the more fundamental need to directly target and transform the unequal power relations that are the root cause of gender inequality. Consequently, the transformative potential of

feminism risks being watered down into a tool for achieving conventional development targets, celebrating increased agency without consistently confronting the structures that originally constrained it (Cadesky, 2020).

The FIAP's operational design, which emphasizes results-based management and a focus on quantifiable outputs, inherently reinforces an instrumentalist approach to gender equality. This management framework requires demonstrating tangible, measurable returns on investment, which naturally prioritizes initiatives where women's empowerment can be directly linked to broader, pre-existing development metrics like economic productivity or poverty rates. Programs are incentivized to focus on counting the number of women who receive small business loans or vocational training, as these outputs are easily reported as "results". However, this focus on quantifiable deliverables can sideline more complex, transformative work aimed at challenging patriarchal norms or shifting power dynamics, as these outcomes are difficult to quantify and may not show immediate, linear results on a results-based framework. (Inter Pares, 2016) This creates a system where feminism is applied not for its transformative potential, but for its utility in generating clear, reportable data that aligns with traditional development goals, thereby cementing the very instrumental logic that defines women's advancement as a means to an end. (Chidwick et al., 2024; Tiessen, 2019).

The Inevitability of Collapse

The rapid and total collapse of women's rights in Afghanistan following the Western withdrawal exposes the profound limits of a liberal feminist foreign policy that refuses to be truly transformative. As Global Affairs Canada's 2020 evaluation acknowledged, while "tangible progress" was made in areas like girls' education and women's parliamentary representation, these advances were largely dependent on international security guarantees and donor funding-conditions that vanished after the 2021 withdrawal. Between 2001-2017 an estimated USD 1.5 billion had been directed to women's programs in the country, including schools, women's shelters, and health initiatives (Zakaria, 2017, p. 45). Evidence from a 2016 UN report found that violence against women increased by 400%, while a 2015 UN report concluded that the aid commitments were not producing the goals and improvements they intended (Zakaria, 2017). Within months, the Taliban banned girls from secondary schools, purged women from public sector jobs, and dismantled gender-focused institutions with no meaningful resistance from the international architecture FIAP had helped build (Global Affairs Canada, 2023). This immediate reversal was not merely a failure of implementation but a predictable consequence of a flawed design. FIAP's model operated on a surface-level, instrumentalist feminism, focusing on building institutions for women within a pre-existing patriarchal power structure rather than challenging and transforming the structure itself. By failing to cultivate deep, organic, and resilient grassroots power that could withstand political shocks, the policy created a dependent and ultimately fragile veneer of progress, which was swiftly erased the moment the external support was removed, thus revealing the stark contradiction between its transformative rhetoric and its non-transformative praxis (Zuercher, 2018).

INTERSECTIONAL AND CULTURAL CRITIQUES

Western Feminism as Universal Truth

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) treats gender equality as a universal model, shaped primarily by Western assumptions that often clash with Afghan cultural and religious contexts. The policy repeatedly centers its language on "women and girls," reflecting an older liberal approach that focuses on inclusion rather than transformation. Danielle Lee, in her 2018 Master's thesis from the University of Ottawa, analyzes this dynamic in depth, highlighting how FIAP frames feminist foreign policy in a way that lacks robust engagement with feminist theory and falls short of transformative aims (Lee, 2018). Despite carrying the word "feminist" in its title, FIAP rarely uses the terms "feminism" or "feminist," and it offers little substantive discussion of feminism's deeper goals, such as confronting the structural roots of inequality, including state violence, economic injustice, and systemic discrimination. Instead, FIAP presents a simplified and static view of gender, portraying 'women and girls' in the Global South as a uniform group with a single shared experience. This perspective ignores how women's lives are shaped by intersecting forces such as war, ethnicity, class, religion, and local understandings of justice and dignity (Cadesky, 2020). By concentrating on measurable outputs like school attendance or access to small loans, the policy avoids addressing the underlying power structures that produce gender-based insecurity. In this way, FIAP depoliticizes feminism, reducing a transformative political project to a set of technical development targets (Morton et al., 2020).

This reflects a broader trend in international development, where the concept of "gender" has increasingly become a depoliticized buzzword, "diluted, denatured, and stripped of its original feminist intent," as Cornwall et al. note in *Feminisms in Development* (pp. 5–6). True feminist praxis seeks to challenge and change systems of oppression, not simply place women within them. FIAP, however, works within existing structures, assuming that inclusion alone is enough to achieve equality.

Rather than engaging with Afghan women's own understandings of justice, dignity, and resistance, including those grounded in Islamic ethics or community-based solidarity, FIAP treated Afghan patriarchy as a cultural defect to be corrected from the outside. This approach reproduces colonial dynamics, echoing Spivak's critique of Western interventions that claim to "save brown women from brown men" while silencing the voices, agency, and diverse realities of Afghan women themselves (Kurtiş & Adams, 2015).

Feminist Policy Fails to See Diversity

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) risks erasing the rich diversity among Afghan women by collapsing them into a singular, universal 'women and girls' category. Although FIAP's stated goal is gender equality and empowerment for "all vulnerable and marginalized groups," its public documentation offers limited evidence of differentiated strategies that account for intersecting identities such as ethnicity, class, religion, and geography. Critics argue that this one-size-fits-all approach aligns

with a “mainstream liberal feminism” that inadequately addresses complex local realities (Morton, Muchiri, & Swiss, 2020). By framing empowerment primarily through inclusion in economic and political systems, FIAP potentially overlooks deeper systemic inequities.

This concern is particularly acute in Afghanistan, where ethnic and religious minorities face disproportionate violence and exclusion under Taliban rule. Reports by United Nations human rights experts highlight how ethnic minorities—most notably Hazara and other religious groups—are subject to targeted repression (UN Human Rights Council, 2024; UN General Assembly, 2025). Their distinct experiences of gender-based violence and discrimination are rooted not only in patriarchy, but in long-standing ethnic marginalization. At the same time, FIAP's public-facing frameworks do not explicitly outline tailored targeting or monitoring mechanisms to reach such highly marginalized groups. (Minority Rights Group, 2025)

By failing to integrate an intersectional analysis of race, ethnicity, and social stratification, FIAP's design risks bypassing those Afghan women who are most marginalized. Stakeholders in Canada have also raised doubts about adequate context-specific engagement, suggesting that programming often reflects donor-driven objectives rather than locally grounded priorities (Chidwick et al., 2024). In effect, rather than recognizing and responding to layered identity dynamics, FIAP's model can perpetuate a myth of the “Afghan woman” as a homogeneous, universal victim in need of rescue. This dynamic not only risks inefficacy in aid delivery but also reproduces colonial patterns of intervention where Western feminist norms are projected onto very different social and cultural landscapes. (Trevisani, 2024)

After the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, Canada's approach to Afghanistan aid fundamentally contradicted its feminist foreign policy commitment to local ownership. Although Canada had previously pledged to support women-led grassroots organizations, it increasingly routed funding through large international NGOs and UN agencies, sidelining Afghan women's groups that held essential local knowledge and long-standing community trust (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This shift mirrored a broader donor retreat from feminist principles: instead of sustaining women-led organizations, donors prioritized operational convenience and risk avoidance, a pattern documented across the humanitarian system. The International Rescue Committee's analysis of global funding practices found that, in Afghanistan, women-led and women's rights organizations had virtually no active projects in 2022 and were almost entirely excluded from pooled funding mechanisms (IRC, 2022). Similarly, a UN Women's survey of Afghan women's civil society organizations showed that 77 percent had no funded projects in 2022 and faced severe barriers to receiving external funds due to banking restrictions and heightened bureaucratic scrutiny under Taliban rule (UN Women, 2022).

Afghan women's organizations themselves repeatedly warned that bypassing female-led groups would further entrench Taliban authority by removing women from the aid delivery architecture altogether. Human Rights Watch (2023a) reported that the Taliban's December 2022 ban on women working in NGOs triggered a humanitarian crisis: operations were suspended because the exclusion of women meant that vulnerable populations, especially women and girls, could not be reached without violating

humanitarian principles. Evidence from peer-reviewed research underscores the severity of this disruption. Barati et al. (2023) found that the ban led to the suspension of health programs, the collapse of nutrition and counseling services for women, and the closure of safe spaces essential for gender-based violence response. Yet rather than developing creative mechanisms to sustain women-led organizations during this crisis, many donors redirected funds toward large international actors with less community embeddedness.

Canada's reallocation of funds thus reflected donor practices that Afghan women activists have described as abandonment (Right to Learn, 2025). Human Rights Watch (2023) noted that most Afghan humanitarian organizations, including women-led groups and those specifically targeting women-headed households, lacked the resources to continue operating, even as international agencies received the overwhelming majority of humanitarian allocations. This pattern has been widely criticized in humanitarian reporting: The New Humanitarian documented how Afghan women NGO leaders argued that donor reliance on large INGOs not only sidelined local expertise but also placed vulnerable populations at greater risk (Latifi, 2022). UN Women and United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) similarly warned that deprioritizing women-led civil society groups undermined gender-sensitive programming and weakened humanitarian access (UN Women & OCHA, 2022). Taken together, these dynamics reveal how donor governments, including Canada, abandoned transformative commitments when confronted with bureaucratic or security constraints, opting for transactional forms of aid delivery that reinforced the very patriarchal structures feminist foreign policy claims to challenge.

Ultimately, Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) reduced gender justice to technical indicators rather than a transformative political project. Rather than prioritizing systemic change in who controls security institutions, educational curricula, or community-level decision-making, success was measured through quantifiable metrics such as school enrollment rates, microfinance uptake, and parliamentary quotas (Bell & Wegner, 2025). This reflects governance feminism logic, whereby normative commitments to gender equality are pursued by governing women's agency, framing women as "agents of change" whose inclusion legitimates neoliberal institutions without fundamentally challenging power structures (Bell & Wegner, 2025). This approach embodies neoliberal governmentality: a technocratic rationality that depoliticizes gender equality by transforming it into manageable problems of measurement and targets (Thornton, 2015). The result treats symptoms while ignoring structural root causes: war, foreign intervention, and intersecting oppressions that fuel women's marginalization. The Office of the Auditor General of Canada (2023) concluded that GAC was unable to show improved outcomes for women and girls because not all tracked project outcomes related to FIAP policy goals, revealing how quantitative indicators prove poorly suited for capturing genuine shifts in power relations or empowerment.

Feminist scholars have long warned against reducing liberation to checkbox exercises. Waring (1988) demonstrated how economic metrics systematically exclude women's unpaid labor, rendering their contributions invisible in development policy. Meanwhile, Kapoor (2008) argues that participatory

development and empowerment discourse can mask neoliberal agendas, serving as veneers for policies reinforcing global hierarchies rather than dismantling them. In attempting to "save" Afghan women through technocratic interventions, Canada thus silenced their voices and reproduced colonial hierarchies it ostensibly opposed: transforming empowerment into superficial metrics within imperial frameworks, exemplifying how feminist foreign policy, divorced from structural critique and local agency, perpetuates the patriarchal and colonial systems it claims to challenge.

THE AID PARADOX AND GEOPOLITICAL CONSTRAINTS

Undermining Gender Aid in Canada's Afghan Strategy

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) promised transformative gender equality in fragile states like Afghanistan through Actions 1 (women's empowerment) and 6 (peace/security), yet implementation revealed an "aid paradox": well-intentioned gender aid undermined by geopolitical forces beyond its control, including aid distribution favoring male-led or Taliban-influenced channels over women-led groups (Global Affairs Canada, 2017; Chidwick et al., 2024). This contradiction became acute due to Pakistan's role as the Taliban's primary enabler post-2001: the Pakistani ISI provided sustained financial, logistical, and sanctuary support, allowing Taliban leadership to operate openly from cities like Quetta, channeling intelligence across the border and positioning Pakistan as a decisive actor in Afghanistan's fate rather than a neutral neighbor (Waldman, 2010; Riedel, 2013).. FIAP's gender initiatives-\$3.9B CAD in aid (2001-2021)-proved fragile, as these havens enabled Taliban resurgence, rendering girls' education and rights gains reversible while complicating aid delivery through interception risks (Global Affairs Canada, 2023.; Aryan, 2022) Critiques highlight how such policies depoliticize feminism, treating equality as technical metrics detached from power dynamics, dooming efforts when regional enablers like Pakistan's maneuvers sustain gender apartheid (Bell & Wegner, 2025). Ultimately, FIAP's limits expose its rhetorical feminism yielding to geopolitics, prioritizing unaddressed proxies over Afghan women's sustained rights.

Gender Aid vs. Geopolitical Reality

Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) gender programming could not succeed while the Taliban, its primary adversary enforcing gender apartheid, enjoyed sustained state sponsorship from Pakistan, rendering women's empowerment initiatives structurally fragile from the outset (Akbari & True, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2017)ost-2001 ISI havens in Quetta enabled Taliban resurgence, fueling cross-border attacks that dismantled two decades of progress despite \$3.9B CAD in aid; girls' secondary enrollment, peaking at 39%, collapsed to zero by 2022 as these sanctuaries empowered insurgents to overrun schools and rights institutions without meaningful resistance (Brookings Institution, 2024; Global Affairs Canada, 2023). This aid paradox—defined as gender funds undermined by unaddressed geopolitical enablers—exposed FIAP's core flaw: treating equality as technical metrics (enrollments,

quotas, microloans) detached from political power dynamics like proxy warfare and patriarchal bargaining (Bell & Wegner, 2025).

FIAP's results-based management prioritized quantifiable outputs over confronting regional actors, sidestepping diplomacy against Pakistan while Taliban taxes intercepted aid flows, favoring male-dominated channels over women-led groups (Chidwick et al., 2024). Critiques of Women, Peace, and Security implementation reveal how such depoliticized feminism instrumentalized Afghan women as "agents of change" within fragile neoliberal structures, ignoring how state-sponsored insurgents co-opted progress through local power deals (Akbari, 2024). Without politically challenging these enablers, gains remained reversible: the 2021 withdrawal erased metrics overnight as Taliban bans purged women from universities and NGOs—a predictable collapse of ungrounded efforts (Crawford & Hares, 2021). This confirms FIAP's rhetorical boldness yielding to geopolitical timidity, prioritizing alliances over transformative justice for Afghan women, directly undermining the thesis that Canada's feminist commitments bow to power politics.

Conditional Feminism

True feminist foreign policy demands confronting all enablers of patriarchal violence, including allied states like Pakistan sustaining Taliban gender apartheid, yet Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) imposed strict geopolitical boundaries (Tiessen, 2019). Canada routinely sanctions aid obstruction elsewhere: imposing measures on Russia/Sudan/Myanmar (2024-2025) for blocking humanitarian access, sanctioning Hamas leaders, and threatening Israel with UK/France over Gaza aid denial (Global Affairs Canada, 2025; CBC, 2025) But chose silence against Pakistan despite ISI havens enabling Taliban aid interception (Global Affairs Canada, 2025). No sanctions, condemnations, or conditions accompanied \$1.2B CAD bilateral aid to Pakistan (2017-2022) even as girls' universities shuttered post-2021, prioritizing NATO partnership and U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy over accountability (Global Affairs Canada, 2023; Auditor General, 2023). This selective restraint, bold against adversaries, timid with allies, exposed FIAP's instrumental limits: gender equality burnished Canada's "progressive leader" branding for UN credibility while evaporating when alliance costs arose (Chapnick, 2019). The Auditor General (2023) found Global Affairs unable to track FIAP women/girls outcomes due to absent power analysis, confirming "governance feminism" where metrics prop up hierarchies without challenging patriarchal proxies (Bell & Wegner, 2025). Post-2021, rhetorical Taliban condemnations continued alongside Pakistan funding, routing aid through multilaterals rather than women-led Afghan groups (Equality Fund, 2022). Canada's comfort choosing Pakistan, despite confronting others, reveals conditional feminism: transformative rhetoric dissolved by strategic convenience. This vindicates the thesis: FIAP's commitments crumble under geopolitical pressure, prioritizing alliances over justice for Afghan women.

CONCLUSION

This analysis has several scope limitations. First, it examines Afghanistan as a bounded case study. Its findings therefore cannot be generalized directly to Canada's feminist international assistance in other contexts, such as Syria, Yemen, or Myanmar. These cases involve different geopolitical conditions, conflict trajectories, institutional environments, and forms of local agency. Afghanistan should consequently be understood as an analytically significant case rather than as a representative example of all Canadian feminist foreign-policy practice.

Second, this study relies primarily on publicly available policy documents, government reports, Auditor General findings, humanitarian reporting, and peer-reviewed scholarship. It does not include original interviews with Afghan women activists, Canadian policymakers, or aid implementers. Such interviews could provide deeper insight into decision-making processes, local interpretations of Canadian programming, and the lived experiences of communities affected by it. The absence of these perspectives also limits the extent to which this study can assess how Afghan women themselves evaluated Canada's assistance.

Third, access to internal Canadian government deliberations remains limited. Public sources cannot fully reveal how policymakers balanced feminist commitments against counter-terrorism legislation, humanitarian access, security concerns, diplomatic relationships, and other geopolitical priorities. The study therefore analyzes documented policy statements and observable outcomes rather than the full range of internal debates that shaped them. This limitation is particularly important because the Auditor General found weaknesses in Global Affairs Canada's information management and its ability to monitor longer-term policy outcomes (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2023).

Finally, Afghanistan's political and humanitarian circumstances continue to evolve. This study covers developments through 2025 and therefore represents a time-bound assessment rather than a final evaluation of Canada's assistance. Taliban restrictions on women's education, employment, movement, and participation in public life continued to develop during and after the period examined (UN News, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025). Future policy changes, shifts in humanitarian access, changes in international funding, or developments in Canada's legal framework could alter the conditions assessed here.

Despite these limitations, the study identifies recurring tensions in FIAP's design and implementation that are documented across government audits, policy evaluations, academic scholarship, and humanitarian reporting. The argument is therefore not that Afghanistan provides a complete representation of Canada's feminist foreign policy, but that it reveals important structural vulnerabilities in the relationship between feminist rhetoric, institutional accountability, local agency, and geopolitical power.

Future research should pursue several distinct pathways. First, longitudinal comparative studies could examine FIAP outcomes across multiple conflict-affected settings and identify which findings are specific to Afghanistan and which reflect broader patterns in Canadian assistance. Second, participatory research and interviews with Afghan women activists, women-led organizations, aid workers, and community

representatives could place local knowledge and agency at the center of analysis. Such research should be designed with careful attention to safety, consent, confidentiality, and the risks faced by participants under Taliban rule. Third, researchers could examine internal government records, parliamentary testimony, and eventually declassified documents to better understand how Canada navigated tensions between feminist commitments, counter-terrorism requirements, humanitarian access, and geopolitical alliance management.

This paper has demonstrated that Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) falls short of genuine feminist principles. Through discussion of three key sections, the contradictions between FIAP's bold rhetoric and practical limitations become clear.

Section 1 assessed tangible commitments in policy and aid delivery. Canada provided \$3.9 billion CAD to Afghanistan from 2001 to 2021 and resettled over 54,700 Afghans. However, bureaucratic backlogs averaging four years for family reunification, unstable implementation, and results-based metrics reduced feminism to technical outputs rather than transformative change. These short-term measures generated headlines but failed to produce sustainable outcomes for Afghan women (Auditor General of Canada, 2023; Chidwick et al., 2024).

Section 2 examined cultural and intersectional critiques. FIAP treated gender equality as a universal Western model. It collapsed diverse Afghan women into a singular "women and girls" category that ignored ethnicity, class, religion, and local contexts. Post-2021, Canada routed aid through large international NGOs rather than women-led groups. This depoliticized approach measured success through enrollment rates and quotas while silencing Afghan voices and reproducing colonial rescue dynamics (Human Rights Watch, 2023; UN Women, 2022).

Section 3 analyzed geopolitical constraints through the aid paradox and Pakistan's role. Pakistan's ISI provided Taliban sanctuaries in Quetta post-2001. This enabled resurgence that collapsed girls' secondary enrollment from 39% to zero by 2022. FIAP's \$3.9 billion proved fragile as aid faced interception risks. Canada imposed no sanctions on Pakistan despite confronting Russia, Sudan, Myanmar, and threatening Israel over aid obstruction elsewhere. Canada maintained \$1.2 billion CAD aid to Islamabad as a NATO partner. This conditional feminism exposed instrumental limits: gender equality served branding while alliances trumped justice (Tiessen, 2019; Global Affairs Canada, 2025).

Feminism's morality demands universal confrontation of patriarchal violence. It requires holding all actors accountable, even inconvenient allies. It centers voices of the most affected and transforms power structures rather than managing symptoms through metrics. Canada's selective application betrays this moral core. Silence in Pakistan while Afghan women endure gender apartheid reveals ethical failure. Feminist foreign policy without moral courage becomes performative optics that perpetuates oppression it claims to challenge. Justice requires accountability to all, not convenience.

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