

Gender's journey in Canadian foreign policy, 1970-2015

1970s-1980s: THE PEAK OF GENDER AWARENESS IN POLICY

Attention to gender equality and women's rights in Canadian foreign development policy reached its peak in the early 1980s, but has been declining since that time and reached bottom with Stephen Harper's Conservative government. During the 1970s and early 1980s, Canada aligned itself with the standards set by the international community at the time and had relatively robust development policies aimed at enhancing women's rights and equality. For instance, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women was established in 1970, and five years later Canada and other United Nations member states declared 1975 as International Women's Year. Then, in 1976, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) established its initial policy guidelines on Women in Development (WID) and eight years later, in 1984, developed the first WID policy.

The Canadian women's movement was increasingly politically influential throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. During this period, more women were elected to office, there were provincial and federal initiatives such as the Ministry of Women's Equality advocating for gender equality, a sexual equality clause was added to the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, and women's bureaus were making policy recommendations. However, attention to gender equality in the policy process began to erode in 1984 with the election of John Turner's "unapologetically neoliberal federal government" (Brodie, 2007, p. 171).

1990s: THE RISE OF NEO-LIBERALISM AND THE DECLINE OF GENDER

Brodie (2007, pp. 167, 171) suggests that the decline of gender as a critical part of Canadian public policy began in the mid-1980s with the rise of neo-liberal

BY EMMA CALLON

Emma Callon holds an MA in international development studies and sociology from the University of Guelph, with a specialization in gender and policy analysis.

governance, increased social conservatism, and a growing backlash against second-wave feminism. At this time, federal funds dedicated to improving the status of women, such as women's bureaus and community shelters, were drastically cut, and by 1995 Status of Women Canada (SWC) was absorbed into the Department of Canadian Heritage. It was with the dissolution of gender-based policy units during the mid-1990s that gender mainstreaming was promoted as an alternative approach (Brodie, 2007, p. 177).

Gender mainstreaming treats gender as a cross-cutting issue at every level of policy, from design to evaluation. Swiss (2012, p. 140) and Tiessen (2015, p. 87) suggest that CIDA's institutionalized gender mainstreaming framework of the late 1990s represents a successful and internationally respected effort to include gender analysis in Canadian foreign policy. However, Brodie argues that gender mainstreaming put gender "everywhere in rhetoric and nowhere in substance" (2007, p. 171). What this means is that women as a category had been added to existing policy but without an acknowledgment of the social construction of gender. Acknowledging gender as a social construction requires a gender and development (GAD) approach to policy. A GAD approach understands gender to be relational, includes men as a development category, and realizes that gender inequalities are the result of patriarchal institutions. However, because Canada's attention to gender equality slumped in the 1990s, when GAD was

being promoted at Cairo and Beijing, Canada has been stuck using a WID policy framework. Thus, when gender is applied to Canadian development policy, it is still usually only in relation to women (Stienstra, 1994, p. 116).

2000s: SHIFTING AWAY FROM INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS WITH THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT, 2006-2015

Canada's internationalism shifted most dramatically in the mid-2000s with the election of Stephen Harper's Conservative government. Attention to gender equality and women's rights had already been declining in the Canadian political sphere, but under the Harper government it fully disappeared. Before Harper was elected, Canada was relatively progressive and secular, maintained the separation of church and state, promoted the armed forces for peacekeeping, and supported the UN system. However, with the Harper government, there was a general disregard for the UN practices (Martin, 2010, p. 112), and attention to gender equality and women's rights in Canadian public policy declined severely with the election of the Harper government, which in 2006 cut funding for over 30 women's organizations and research bodies.

Swiss (2012, p. 135) argues that gender equality became instrumentalized in Canadian foreign policy under the Harper government and was only present when it served Canada's national interests and objectives. For instance, rhetoric about "saving" Afghan women from Taliban oppression was used as a tool to legitimize and generate support for military intervention in Afghanistan (Swiss, 2012, p. 141). More recently, during the 2015 election campaign, the Harper government pledged to create a RCMP tip line to report suspected "barbaric

Gender in Canadian foreign policy, page 24

cultural practices against women and girls” in the name of protecting victimized women and children. These barbaric cultural practices included polygamy, forced marriage, and honour killings. When pressed on whether or not domestic violence would be considered a barbaric practice, Harper did not affirm that it would be, indicating only a feigned interest in women’s well-being, with xenophobic undertones. Here, the broader agenda was to employ wedge politics aimed at creating tensions and dividing Canadians during election time.

In 2010, the Muskoka Initiative on Maternal, Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) was announced with the purpose of “saving the lives of mothers and children under the age of five” (CBC News, 2010). The Muskoka Initiative pledged approximately \$7 billion over ten years toward three main objectives concerning MNCH: strengthening health systems, reducing the burden of disease, and improving health and nutrition practices. What was missing from the Harper government’s understanding of these three objectives was an inclusion of family planning and abortion-related services. The Harper government considered the Muskoka Initiative to be Canada’s top development priority and regarded Canada as a global leader on improving MNCH around the world.

The Harper government framed the Muskoka Initiative as a policy created in the interests of women and children. Hence, the Muskoka Initiative may have reflected a renewal of concern for gender equality globally. However, given that the Harper government had a history of instrumentalizing gender and broader social issues to serve their political interests, it is possible that the Muskoka Initiative was in part designed to achieve something similar. For instance, Swiss argues the Muskoka Initiative was a way to “put a Canadian stamp on a worthwhile initiative” in an effort to “generate prestige and positive reporting around the [G8] Summit” (2012, p. 141). Thus, the gender equality rhet-

The Liberal Party, led by Justin Trudeau, has made steps toward improving gender equality and ensuring women’s rights within Canada, which warrants a certain level of optimism.

oric employed around the Muskoka Initiative may have been a tool to achieve broader foreign policy aims or to garner positive press and international support for the government.


One clear example of Canada’s movement away from gender-based analysis and toward gender instrumentalism in foreign policy was CIDA’s 2007 shift in policy discourse about gender (Carrier & Tiessen, 2015, p. 189; Swiss, 2012, p. 141; Tiessen, 2015). Before CIDA was merged with the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, it was instructed by Ottawa to substitute the term “gender equality” with the phrase “equality between men and women” in its official policy discourse. This shift represented a philosophical disengagement from international commitments to undertake gender-based analysis in development policy (Carrier & Tiessen, 2015, p. 189; Swiss, 2012, p. 141; Tiessen, 2015). Furthermore, the shift institutionalized the gender essentialisms that assign specific characteristics to men and women and likely informed the Muskoka Initiative. Carrier and Tiessen (2015, p. 190) suggest that gender equality had officially disappeared from Canadian foreign policy as a way to appeal to the Conservative party base. Therefore, because of the rise of neo-liberalism as both an ideology and a set of policies, gender equality and women’s rights have been delegitimized and dismantled and have disappeared from foreign development policies, and these changes occurred most significantly under the Harper government (Brodie, 2007).

2015: THE POST-HARPER GOVERNMENT ERA

In October 2015, Canadians elected a Liberal majority government, which allows space for increased attention to gender equality in Canadian policy. The Liberal Party, led by Justin Trudeau, has made steps toward improving gender equality and ensuring women’s rights within Canada, which warrants a certain level of optimism. For instance, Trudeau achieved gender parity in the Cabinet, illustrating the Liberal Party’s dedication to increasing women’s representation in Canadian politics. Moreover, unlike the Harper government, all Liberal Party members are expected to vote against putting limits on abortion.

When it comes to abortion abroad, the Liberal Party’s platform on foreign development assistance for MNCH has indicated that the initiative will be “driven by evidence and outcomes, not ideology” and that “the full range of reproductive health services” will be included in the Muskoka Initiative (Connolly, 2015). However, when asked specifically about whether or not abortion would be included in the Muskoka Initiative’s funding, Liberal Party spokesperson Jean-Luc Ferland did not explicitly refer to the Muskoka Initiative, but said “the Liberals absolutely support . . . abortion where it is legal” (Connolly, 2015).

In spite of these steps taken by the Liberal Party to recognize women’s interests, the government has not displayed a strong commitment to a GAD approach. For example, the Liberal Party failed to recognize men as a vulnerable category when it refused to

accept single male refugees from Syria. Although there is room for stronger gender-aware policy, the Liberal Party of Canada offers reason to believe the Muskoka Initiative will at least include funding for abortion in countries where it is legal. However, this is the bare minimum of what should be done by the Canadian government to address issues like maternal mortality and global gender inequality. 

REFERENCES

- Brodie, Janine. (2007). Canada's three Ds: The rise and decline of gender-based policy capacity. In Marjorie Griffin Cohen & Janine Brodie (Eds.), *Remapping gender in the new global order* (pp. 166-184). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Carrier, Krystal, & Tiessen, Rebecca. (2015). The erasure of "gender" in Canadian foreign policy under the Harper Conservatives: The significance of the discursive shift from "gender equality" to "equality between women and men." *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 21(2), 95-111.
- CBC News. (2010, April 26). No abortion in Canada's G8 maternal health plan. Retrieved from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/no-abortion-in-canada-s-g8-maternal-health-plan-1.877257>
- Connolly, Amanda. (2015, October 16). Liberals would fund abortion services under maternal health initiative. *iPolitics*. Retrieved from <http://ipolitics.ca/2015/10/16/liberals-would-fund-abortion-services-under-maternal-health-initiative/>
- Martin, Lawrence. (2010). *Harperland: The politics of control*. Toronto, ON: Penguin Canada.
- Stienstra, Deborah. (1994). Can the silence be broken? Gender and Canadian foreign policy. *International Journal*, 5, 103-127.
- Swiss, Liam. (2012). Gender, security, and instrumentalism: Canada's foreign aid in support of national interest? In Stephen Brown (Ed.), *Struggling for effectiveness: CIDA and Canadian foreign aid* (pp. 135-158). Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Tiessen, Rebecca. (2015). Gender essentialism in Canadian foreign aid commitments to women, peace, and security. *International Journal*, 70(1), 84-100.
- Grubel, Herbert. (2013). *Canada's immigrant selection policies: Recent record, marginal changes and needed reforms*. Vancouver, BC: Fraser Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/canadas-immigrant-selection-policies.pdf>
- Heller, Monica. (2008). Bourdieu and "literacy education." In James Albright & Allan Luke (Eds.), *Pierre Bourdieu and literacy education* (pp. 50-67). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ibbitson, John. (2014). *Bootstrap immigrants: Assessing the conservative transformation of Canada's immigration policy*. Waterloo, ON: Centre for International Governance Innovation. Retrieved from https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/pb_no52.pdf
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (1996). *The knowledge-based economy*. OCDE/GD(96)102. Paris: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/sti/sci-tech/1913021.pdf>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2013). *OECD skills outlook 2013: First results from the survey of adult skills*. Paris: OECD Publishing. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264204256-en>
- St. Clair, Ralf. (2012). The limits of levels: Understanding the International Adult Literacy Surveys (IALS). *International Review of Education*, 58, 759-776. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11159-013-9330-z>
- Statistics Canada. Culture, Tourism, and the Centre for Education Statistics. (2011). *Literacy for life: Further results from the adult literacy and life skills survey*. Ottawa, ON: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/89-604-x/89-604-x2011001-eng.pdf>
- Statistics Canada. Tourism and the Centre for Educational Statistics Division. (2013). *Skills in Canada: First results from the program for the international assessment of adult competencies*. Ottawa, ON: Author. Retrieved from <http://www.cmec.ca/Publications/Lists/Publications/Attachments/315/Canadian-PIAAC-Report.EN.pdf>
- Walker, J., & Rubenson, K. (2014). The media construction of an adult literacy agenda in Canada. *Globalization, Societies and Education*, 12(1), 143-163. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2013.859002>
- World Bank. (2015). *World development indicators: Gross domestic product 2015*. Washington, DC: World Bank. Retrieved from <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>

Literacy proficiency requirements continued from page 18

Learn more about Canada Watch and the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at <http://robarts.info.yorku.ca>