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Fit for feminism? Examining policy capacity for Canada's feminist foreign policy

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ABSTRACT

Canada's foreign policy, traditionally deployed as an exercise in retrospection, requires a strategic direction to address shared planetary threats of climate change, public health, and socio-economic crises. For over three years, the government's pledge to articulate not only a strategic foreign policy but one with an explicitly feminist mandate, has remained unfulfilled. Given the risk of political instrumentalization of feminist labels and the lessons on policy-implementation gap of global gender equality agendas, this article examines Canada's readiness for a feminist global engagement. Through Wu et al.'s ([2015]. Policy capacity: A conceptual framework for understanding policy competences and capabilities. *Policy and Society*, 34(3–4), 165–171. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2015.09.001>) conceptual framework of policy capacity, Canada's feminist foreign policy emerges as lacking critical political and policy pre-requisites. This article outlines the main gaps across systems- and institutional levels and presents Canada's feminist foreign policy project as mired in politically fragmented, operationally uncoordinated, and institutionally underfunded policy capacity pillars that government and non-government actors are called to address.

RÉSUMÉ

La politique étrangère du Canada, traditionnellement déployée comme un exercice de rétrospection, a besoin d'une orientation stratégique pour faire face aux menaces planétaires communes que sont le changement climatique, la santé publique et les crises socio-économiques. Depuis plus de trois ans, la promesse du gouvernement d'articuler non seulement une politique étrangère, mais aussi explicitement féministe, n'a pas été tenue. Étant donné le risque d'instrumentalisation politique des étiquettes féministes et des leçons tirées de l'écart entre les politiques et la mise en œuvre des programmes mondiaux en faveur de l'égalité des sexes, cet article examine dans quelle mesure le Canada est prêt à s'engager sur la voie du féminisme à l'échelle mondiale. Selon le cadre conceptuel de la capacité politique de Wu, Ramesh et Howlett (2015), la politique étrangère féministe du Canada semble manquer de prérequis politiques et stratégiques essentiels. Cet article souligne les principales lacunes

KEYWORDS

Feminist foreign policy; policy design; Canada; policy capacity

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au niveau des systèmes et des institutions, et présente le projet de politique étrangère féministe du Canada comme étant embourbé dans des piliers de capacité politique fragmentés sur le plan politique, non coordonné sur le plan opérationnel et sous-financé sur le plan institutionnel, que les acteurs gouvernementaux et non-gouvernementaux sont appelés à prendre en charge.

Canada's quest for feminist foreign policy

Canada's foreign policy has traditionally lent itself to *ex post facto* analysis, given the country's "consistently inconsistent" global engagement and the dearth of official foreign policy agenda documents (Smith & Ajadi, 2020; Swiss, 2018). Already in 1952, Lester B. Pearson, as a then-Secretary of State for External Affairs, defended Canada's failure to articulate a strategic foreign policy:

of course, we have a foreign policy. But in these changing days with changing conditions, it's the collectivity of all the decisions we make from week to week, and, at the end of the year, we find out what our foreign policy has been. (Department of External Affairs, 1952)

Seven decades later, Canada remains without a single forward-oriented framework for the country's global engagement.

Our "changing days with changing conditions" are marked by planetary threats of climate, public health, and socio-economic crises, which require a strategic direction for Canada's global engagement. In line with the long-standing yet vaguely defined commitment to a feminist agenda of the Trudeau Government (Smith & Ajadi, 2020), the then-Minister of Foreign Affairs, François-Philippe Champagne, announced an elaboration of a feminist foreign policy in February 2020 (Feminist Foreign Policy Working Group, 2021). This announcement was met with apprehension about the government's ability to deliver on such a promise as the country's already-existing feminist international assistance policy (FIAP) emerged embedded in "feminist neoliberalism" (Parisi, 2020; Thomson, 2020), and underfunded (Morton et al., 2020; Novovic, 2021), and insufficiently intersectional agendas (Mason, 2019).

This article contributes to a constructive scrutiny of Canada's project of feminist foreign policy (FFP) by offering warnings about the lack of broader system capacity required for its effective adoption and implementation. Based on the scholarly lessons about the policy-implementation gap of gender equality commitments, I highlight the importance of focusing on Canada's policy ecosystem, as a whole, to map out possible policy obstacles (bottlenecks) and therefore critical areas of intervention. To identify policy requisites for Canada's FFP, I am employing the conceptual framework of policy capacity proposed by Wu et al. (2015). This framework serves as a heuristic device for a systems-level analysis of political questions that mediate a potential feminist foreign policy implementation, and policy considerations through which feminist political commitments have traditionally been de-politicized and de-prioritized. The interdisciplinary scope of this article results in an expanded discussion about Canada's feminist foreign policy beyond the policy content, re-politicizing the question of political commitment and institutional capacity for feminist approaches to Canada's global engagement.

This article is organized as follows. First, I outline feminist literature on the gender equality policy-implementation gap across political, institutional, and individual dimensions. Next, I introduce the conceptual framework of policy capacity of Wu et al. (2015), which allows us to understand the requisites for Canada's feminist foreign policy and its effective implementation. I then operationalize this policy capacity framework, highlighting the conflicts between Canada's existing political context and policy objectives brought forward by civil society. Lastly, I suggest that policy warnings should not be understood as unsurmountable barriers to Canada's FFP but as critical nodes of political contestation whose resolution would help to prevent technical cooptation or policy failure.

Domestic capacity for feminist foreign policy

Scholarly literature has defined what constitutes a feminist approach to foreign policy (Robinson, 2021; Scheyer & Kumskova, 2019), compared FFP approaches (Sundström et al., 2021; Thomson, 2020), and critically examined feminist policy commitments to international assistance (Parisi, 2020), trade (Hannah et al., 2021; Macdonald & Ibrahim, 2019), defense (Broadhead & Howard, 2019; Murphy, 2024), and the Women, Peace and Security agenda (Haastrup, 2020). Scholars also highlighted insufficient considerations of intersectional mechanisms of exclusion foreign policy arenas continue to reproduce, particularly as they relate to genders, sexual identities, race, religion, (dis)ability and other categories of marginalization (Aylward & Brown, 2020; Bouka, 2021; Mason, 2019; Morton et al., 2020; Smith & Ajadi, 2020).

Moreover, as Kaarbo (2015) highlights, critical assessments of feminist foreign policy should also address the domestic context, which determines the extent to which a country can commit to, and more so implement, feminist objectives. Vučetić (2017), Brown (2023) and Macdonald (2019) note Canada's foreign policy's self-serving attributes: particularly if we consider Canada's arm deals with Saudi Arabia or its support for extractive industries abroad. Broadhead and Howard further contest the internal coherence of Canada's feminist commitments in their analysis of Canada's opposition to the nuclear ban treaty (2019). The risk of the feminist label, then, is not limited to a potential technical policy failure, but political cooptation for electoral interests. This critique gains in gravity amidst Canada's longstanding complicity (Swan, 2021) in the State of Israel's violation of Palestinian human rights in Gaza and West Bank.

Moreover, feminist foreign policy can legitimize interventionist strategies of military and cultural imperialism, while minimizing the pressure for domestic social justice interventions (Bouka, 2021). An inquiry into the South African (Haastrup, 2020) feminist foreign policy, for example, points to virtue-signaling that deflect from domestic discussions on gender and racial justice. Vague definitions of feminist commitments enable poor policy coherence, sheltering governments from political pressure to advance social justice, while achieving limited or no progress abroad (Chapnick, 2019; Murphy, 2024; Smith & Ajadi, 2020). In fact, Midzain-Gobin and Dunton (2021) argue that the FIAP reproduces gender coloniality, which further erodes domestic efforts at the reconciliation with Indigenous peoples.

Critiques of Canada's FFP warn us about the limitations of existing articulations of FFP aspects as they relate to aid, trade, disarmament etc. as well as the track-record of the

Trudeau Government's coherence with, albeit vaguely defined, feminist agendas. In the anticipation of the FFP document Champagne announced in 2020, a critical question emerges around the overall capacity of Canada's policy ecosystem to articulate such a long-anticipated policy, as well as ensure system-wide (government and non-government capacity) to implement it.

Applying the policy capacity model to the analysis of requisites for Canada's feminist foreign policy

Across the international relations literature, reasons for slow progress toward the implementation of gender equality policy commitments are listed across political, institutional, and individual levels, pointing to the importance of different political systems and regime structures, levels of women's participation in elected political roles (Devlin & Elgie, 2008; Hogg, 2009; Refki et al., 2017), and legislative (including constitutional) protections frameworks such as gender quotas (Berry et al., 2021; Burnet, 2011; Dahlerup, 2008). Other inquiries have examined structural patriarchy within bureaucratic structures and development agencies (Kwesiga, 2018; Tiessen, 2007), and civil society organizations (Dogra, 2011; Narayanaswamy, 2014; Rao & Delorme, 2024). Lastly, feminist scholars have examined individual dimensions of policy expertise for gender mainstreaming, the role of so-called feminist bureaucrats (or femocrats) (Eyben, 2010; Prügl, 2021) and gender expertise more broadly (Hoard, 2015; Kunz et al., 2019).

These political, institutional, and individual dimensions are co-constituted, making integrated and cross-referential analyses crucial for effective policy design. Most studies tend to focus on a single dimension (if not a single actor), offering detailed understandings of slow progress toward gender equality. Systems-level policy analyses, therefore, add to this discussion by integrating lessons on common policy bottlenecks and highlighting their interconnections. By employing Wu, Ramesh and Howlett's framework of policy capacity (2015), I will combine multi-dimensional considerations about policy requisites of Canada's FFP. This analytical framework from policy studies will help to highlight less discussed yet critical pre-requisites for Canada's policy capacity that emerge from a systems-level perspective.

As Wu et al. (2015) argue, policy success depends on dimensions of policy capacity, which, analyzed at a systems level, reveal aspects of critical policy capacity. Policy capacity dimensions (i) analytical, (ii) operational, and (iii) political types of competencies across (i) individual, (ii) organizational, and (iii) systemic levels deliver nine dimensions (see Table 1), aligned with the scholarship on gender mainstreaming and feminist foreign policy outlined in the previous section. These policy dimensions are co-constitutive: e.g. for individual analytical capacity (of gender equality experts) to translate to organizational analytical capacity, effective information management, consultative

Table 1. Wu et al. policy capacity matrix.

Levels of resources and capabilities	Skills and Competences		
	Analytical	Operational	Political
Individual	Individual analytical	Individual operational	Individual political
Organizational	Organizational analytical	Organizational operational	Organizational political
Systemic	Systemic analytical	Systemic operational	Systemic political

decision-making, and corporate accountability would all need to be set up. Therefore, this framework highlights pre-requisites (across policy ecosystems and formal institutions) that deserve attention alongside discussion on the FFP content or specific policy entrepreneurs like Prime Minister Trudeau (Chapnick, 2019; Tiessen & Black, 2020).

Without disputing the usefulness of these studies, I hereafter offer a systems-level observation that encompasses government and non-government actors (such as academia, civil society, private consulting agencies etc.). Differentiating between individual, organizational, and systemic levels is critical in the context of Canada's FFP, which straddles six line ministries (of foreign affairs, development, trade, defense, immigration, and environment). FFP is also directly linked to other government bodies (e.g. the Ministry of Finance, Prime Minister's Office), non-government organizations (NGOs), and other sovereign, multilateral, and non-government actors (e.g. United Nations agencies, international and foreign-based civil society organizations). The systems-oriented perspective will allow to identify diverse entry points actors involved in FFP articulation and implementation might want to prioritize. Sections below operationalize the nine dimensions of policy capacity for Canada's FFP, combining feminist scholarship, policy interventions (such as statistical and policy analyses) and policy recommendations outlined in the What We Heard document of the Feminist Foreign Policy Working Group (2021). Resulting recommendations should not be understood as a finite or a neutral set of conclusions, but possible indicators of insufficient policy capacity.

Fit for feminist foreign policy?

Interrogating Canada's systemic capacity for feminist foreign policy

For Wu et al. (2015), the systemic-political dimension is the most likely to strongly influence all other spheres of policy capacity, especially the critical (minimum necessary) political capacity, dependent on perceived legitimacy and public approval of policy commitments. The overall complexity of the policy universe in which feminist foreign policy is embedded, as well as spheres of political legitimacy involved in what corresponds to the **systemic-political capacity** for FFP indicate a high level of government commitment needed to effectively overcome any policy obstacles (as opposed to just paying lip service) – at the highest echelons of elected politics.

The promise of Canada's FFP implies solving not only the challenge of articulating a foreign policy approach in low-visibility global context of planetary threats but also, designing a foreign policy informed by and oriented toward national and global feminist agendas, in all their diversity. The complexity of this policymaking endeavor is reflected in the extended timeframe for Canada's FFP elaboration. Since February 2020 when it was first announced until May 2024 (at the time of publication), the Government has merely published a "scene setter document on feminist foreign policy" and invited written submissions to help inform its process. While a consortium of civil society actors submitted recommendations, many of which are encapsulated in Feminist Foreign Policy Working Group's "What We Heard" document (2021), no official steps forward have been put publicly revealed by the Government.

For systemic-political capacity, the elected officials would need to believe that the Canadian public not only supports the notion of a feminist foreign policy. As Brown (2018) points out, all Canadian parties pursue global development priorities based on their party preferences. However, parties rarely discuss foreign policy with the Canadian public: the 2021 federal election leader debates did not include foreign policy as a topic despite being held amidst a global pandemic and a climate crisis (Massie et al., 2021). The government, therefore, has not shown interest in engaging Canadians in debates about the implications of shared global threats for Canada's domestic or foreign agendas.

The complexity of the Government's task at hand is intimidated by policy expectations reflected in the *What We Heard* document (2021), which underlines the importance of internal policy framework coherence (across trade, defense, consular, immigration, international assistance, and environmental pillars) as well as a set of policy pivots. While some policy recommendations call for the continuation of government action (e.g. Canada's leadership in multilateral Women, Peace, and Security fora), others demand a significant scale-up of government action (e.g. mainstreaming gender equality considerations in all aspects of trade policies as opposed to the current approach of gender-related, non-binding statements, Macdonald, 2022).

Moreover, a significant number of recommendations call for a fundamental re-orientation of Canada's traditional global engagement toward pacifist and ecological feminisms. For example, the Feminist Foreign Policy Working Group echoed calls for Canada, ranked 17th in the world for arms-exports (Wezeman et al., 2023), to commit to disarmament and demilitarization. Most recently, the Canadian Government has been issued a formal warning about the intent to sue high-ranking officials for their complicity in war crimes against the Palestinians before the International Criminal Court (ICJP Legal Working Group for Canadian Accountability, 2023), which further raises Vučetić's (2017) and Swan's (2021) concern about Canada's failure to uphold human rights, let alone feminist principles, in its global engagement.

Even the promised green transition remains off track, as signaled by the country's "highly insufficient" performance according to the Canada's Climate Action Tracker (2023) and its low ranking by the Climate Change Performance Index (2023). The Human Rights Watch World Report 2023 found Canada's steps to hold its extractive industry (which accounts for 75% of the world's mining activity) accountable inadequate (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Systemic-operational capacity (defined as the "coordination of governmental and non-governmental efforts to address collective problems" (Wu et al., 2015, p. 169)) is another vulnerable dimension of Canada's FFP capacity. The already-cited discrepancy between domestic and foreign policy targets across trade, defense, and economic agendas alone suggests likely policy-implementation gaps. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), Canada's top exports are dependent on the petroleum industry (accounting for crude oil and gas), mining exports, and sawn wood (2023), none of which are aligned with commitments to environmental justice. The same is true for Canada's economic dependence on the mining industry (which accounted for 5% of the country's GDP in 2021 (Mining Association of Canada, 2023)) and arms production (with defense and security contributing \$7B in 2020 to a total GDP of \$1,576 billion (ISED 2022)).

However, this dependency is not large enough to prohibit a long-term policy reversal, within the broader just (energy) transition. Until such a shift is triggered, divergent ministerial mandates indicate limited inter-departmental political agendas and therefore low systemic-operational capacity. To ensure alignment, Canada's domestic and international priorities would need to fall under a common framework that considers Canada's trade conditions and identifies domestic policy solutions (and government incentives) for any related GDP losses (including lost jobs and social security that accompanies them).

A more encouraging signal is the government's Gender-based Analysis Plus (GBA+) policy articulated in 2011 and implemented across all government departments (Hankivsky & Mussell, 2018). This policy promises to integrate intersectional approaches to a rights-based and norms-focused approach to gender equality across all areas of the Canadian public service. In 2018, Canada introduced gender budgeting and in 2021, all ministerial mandate letters contained direct references to GBA+, in addition to an already established accountability framework for its implementation (Office of the Auditor General of Canada, 2022).

The Privy Council Office, the Treasury Board of Canada Secretariat, and Women and Gender Equality Canada (the institutions formally in charge of the GBA+ implementation) took important steps to produce resources and offer policy guidance (Hankivsky & Mussell, 2018). As a result, GBA+ programs supported the increase of individual-level expertise (Scala & Paterson, 2017). However, both the Office of the Auditor General (2016) and scholars (Hankivsky & Mussell, 2018) report persistent institutional capacity gaps, including the lack of clarity on what the "plus" in GBA+ stands for. In this sense, operational-analytical capacity threatens to ignore hierarchies of race, migration status, disability, Indigeneity etc., thereby leading to a de-politicization of political commitments through institutional policy capacity gaps, as Bouka warns (2021). Overall, GBA+ offers a system-wide policy background onto which FFP can be based but it also stands as a warning about the government's track record of failing to ensure system-wide capacity for intersectional analysis.

Systemic-analytical capacity considerations, in fact, emerge as tied to the solutions of fragmented institutional mandates of Canada's foreign policy-related ministries. If the challenge is to reconcile political (including public legitimacy and electoral base priorities) with organizational mandates and sector-specific frameworks, then sound policy advice, integrated policymaking, and public engagement emerge as requisites of effective FFP adoption and even more so implementation. Systemic-analytical capacity is defined by general resources of "scientific, statistical, and educational facilities in a society" that allows access to education, data dissemination, and ability to impact government decisions (Wu et al., 2015, p. 169).

Therefore, evidence-based and ethically informed policy recommendations that the government can adopt to reconcile currently divergent foreign and domestic policy interests and communicate them to the public in ways that garner legitimation are key. This knowledge production should account for the limitations of electoral politics (to support systemic political capacity) but also be applicable (to support systemic operational capacity). Non-government actors also face capacity bottlenecks in informing foreign and domestic policy cohesion and their popular sensitization. Significant concerns about the operationalizability arise in the broader context of funding cuts to higher education institutions (OECD, 2019). Civil society actors are undermined by severe cuts and political persecution of civil society by the Stephen Harper government but also low

Table 2. Systemic capacity for FFP.

Systemic political	Systemic organizational	Systemic analytical
Limited understanding of the popular support for FFP commitments	Divergent ministerial and government department mandates across FFP pillars	Underfunded academic institutions and professional training programs and high government reliance on private sector analytics
Divergent electoral promises across domestic and foreign policy positions	Existing GBA+ offers helpful policy foundation for FFP but existing implementation gaps suggest likely capacity gaps.	Underfunded and politically intimidated civil society organizations

levels of funding for Canada's independent policy analysis ever since (Cameron & Kwiecien, 2019; Stritch, 2018). Meanwhile, government departments' institutional investments in analytical capacity have been de-prioritized in favor of private consultancy firms. While the annual sum of recent scandalous figure of reported Cdn\$15 billions of government-awarded funds in external contracts extends far beyond policy advice, the majority of policy-oriented contracts are awarded to private actors (Wernick, 2023). Decades of under-investments in systemic analytical capacity are difficult to ignore in assessing this dimension, summarized in Table 2.

Interrogating Canada's organizational capacity for feminist foreign policy

Organizational-political dimension of policy capacity is rooted in the objective of connecting government departments to the broader sector and the public to allow for policy participation. What We Heard report (2021) highlights the importance of involving women's rights organizations, feminist movements, academics, and people with lived experiences in specific foreign policy agendas across all processes of FFP design, implementation, and evaluation. The organizational-political capacity is, in the case of FFP, particularly connected with the **organizational-operational capacity** (to coordinate inter-workings of government departments, both in terms of internal processes and their coordination with academia, think-tanks, and other government branches). These two dimensions are critical because feminist principles require transcending long-standing standard operating procedures, diplomatic protocols, and missions- and department-based approaches.

As Kirby points out, *realpolitik* continues to hold the epistemic authority within foreign policy debates, and is the fundamental approach (driven by risks, national self-interested pursuits, and compliance-oriented logic) that has informed existing foreign policy practices and political decision-making. To avoid the coupling of liberal feminism and realism, which Kirby describes as a "troubling and surprising dialogue" (2023, p. 10) resulting in "fempolitik," a more direct contestation of *realpolitik* in Canada's foreign policy approaches is needed. Feminist ethics require that greater trust be placed in foreign service personnel and other key advisors, with the skills and capacity to engage actors traditionally excluded from feminist foreign policy contexts, apply intersectional analysis, and promote bottom-up policymaking (Robinson, 2021).

Organization-analytical capacity, therefore, is crucial and reliant on experts with the appropriate skillset to collect, process, and operationalize data for effective policy implementation. As Achilleous-Sarli and Haastrup (2023) point out, integrating critical

Table 3. Organizational capacity for FFP.

Organizational-political	Organizational-operational	Organizational-analytical
Consultative processes exist but require more accountability, inclusivity, and accessibility directly tied to FFP recommendations	Institutions require updated decision-making and cross-divisional coordination processes to shift from realist to feminist ethics	Investments in organizational strategic positioning, agile and adaptive planning, learning, and evidence-based analytics is long overdue

feminist (and global social justice) analysis into more traditional foreign policy analysis (generally less oriented toward social justice), emerges as yet another requisite of strengthened organizational-analytical capacity. Key line ministries, diplomatic service, and advisory organizations need to transcend realist takes on foreign policy and apply feminist rights-based principles instead. This operational readiness (of Canada's bureaucratic apparatus) to do so is explicitly challenged in the *What We Heard* report (Feminist Foreign Policy Working Group, 2021).

Canada's organizational policy capacity has increasingly garnered attention, both with public debates about political and operational viability of key government departments. In 2022, the Standing Senate Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade initiated a review of Canada's foreign service, commissioning a report on "the Canadian foreign service and elements of the foreign policy machinery within Global Affairs Canada" (Senate of Canada, 2022). Initial hearings offer significant reports of organizational-political, -operational, and -analytical resources of Canada's foreign service: gaps in cross-departmental coordination, ineffective data sharing and decision-making systems, insufficient investment in subject-matter experts, and low recruitment and career development frameworks (Senate of Canada, 2022). Moreover, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Melanie Joly, herself, announced a similar study in 2022, citing the need to "keep up with these challenging times" (Blatchford, 2022).

The international assistance pillar has also been under scrutiny, both in the mid-term review of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD DAC, 2021) and in the Auditor General's report, which found GAC to be unable to show results on its FIAP targets (Office of Auditor General, 2023), and deemed the organizational-operational capacity (internal systems and processes such as information management), in need of reform. This dimension is summarized in Table 3.

Interrogating Canada's individual-level capacity for feminist foreign policy

Individual-level capacity allows us to consider aspects of policy capacity related to policy entrepreneurship, intra-party dynamics and other dynamics that fundamentally shape institutional and system-level capacity. **Individual-political capacity** of actors such as ministers, their advisors, and deputies to apply "policy acumen" and navigate broader political contexts is influenced by the already existing organizational-level capacity and systemic-political capacity. Tiessen and Okoli (2022) offer hope about the individual-political capacity by pointing to "feminist inside activists" in senior and mid-level government positions committed to the FFP agenda. However, the scholarship on integrated policy analysis begs the question about the effectiveness of policy entrepreneurs without enabling policy arenas.

A possible limitation of an already fragmented policy arena of FFP (given the shared mandate across six ministries) is that of cabinet reshuffling: according to the Parliament of Canada records, Trudeau governments have seen cabinet shuffle relevant to the six line ministries eight times between 2015 and 2023. Frequent shuffles impact not only sitting ministers but also their advisory teams, favoring centralized decision-making and implicating **individual operational capacity** (of ministers) and organizational operational capacity of their departments, mediating the relationship between the two arenas of governance (elected vs. public administration).

The linkages between individual political and individual operational capacity are challenged by the institutional history of Global Affairs Canada (GAC), formed through a 2013 merger of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) (Essex & Carmichael, 2017). This new department resulted in a new institutional culture, which has been argued as bureaucratically cumbersome and less conducive to nurturing technical expertise, forming and enabling the effectiveness of foreign service actors (Essex & Carmichael, 2017; Livermore, 2022; Renaud et al., 2021). Undue centralization and risk-aversion, harmful standard operating and human resource policies, insufficient strategy for institutional evolution and technical expertise are all common themes of expert testimonies and analyses provided during and around Senate hearings and media inquiries. In this case, eroding organizational-analytical and organizational-operational capacity is widening gaps in individual-analytical and -operational capacity.

In fact, the challenges of organizational neglect of internal expertise, institutional incentives for individual-analytical capacity, and overall erosion of bureaucratic autonomy by the stronghold of elected officials outlined above raise concerns about **individual-analytical capacity**. Howlett (2015) describes individual-analytical capacity as experts' ability to access and analytically process technical knowledge, which we know from feminist literature on gender expertise (Hoard, 2015) to be the role of gender equality experts and gender focal points, but also other policy experts on context-specific issues. Therefore, to strengthen individual analytical capacity (of junior program officers, specialists, and policy advisors), the Government would not only need to hire more gender experts but also ensure broader organizational changes such as integrated gender analysis in missions' strategic planning and budgeting, as well as broader investments in individual- and organizational- analytical and operational capacity.

Civil society remarks about GAC's lack of diversity and feminist care practices within its own institutional frameworks (Feminist Foreign Policy Working Group, 2021) are corroborated by the 2022 report by the Public Sector Integrity Commissioner, which details cases of gross mismanagement and breach of a code of conduct within GAC (Public Sector Integrity Commissioner, 2022). Other pillars of Canada's foreign policy, such as defense and environment are under even more damning scrutiny. Canada Armed Forces have been facing a decade-long scandal of workplace violence and sexual assault, with over a dozen senior leaders held responsible for a culture of pervasive abuse (Walker, 2023).

Lastly, the already-outlined systemic- and organizational-analytical capacity limitations (of underinvestment in higher education, and civil society's policy and advocacy expertise) further undermine the positions of existing FFP experts across non-government institutions to dedicate the necessary time and financial resources to strengthened analytical capacity. Because time and resources have generally reflected existing class, race, gender,

Table 4. Individual capacity for FFP.

Individual-political capacity	Individual-operational capacity	Individual-analytical capacity
Frequent cabinet shuffles and delineated ministerial mandates limit ministerial but support prime ministers' area of intervention	Incompletely implemented government mergers lead to unclear bureaucratic mandates and stronger elected officials' oversight	Prolonged and systemic underfunding erodes institutional actors' (across government, academia, and civil society organizations) analytical capacity
Breaches of code of conduct within GAC and sexual assault and violence within Canada's military further erode these dimensions.		

and other forms of inequality, limited individual-analytical capacity threatens to perpetuate existing biases in articulating and later implementing Canada's FFP. [Table 4](#) highlights individual capacity gaps.

Conclusion

In this article, I problematized the discussions on Canada's FFP limited to its policy content, as they ignore issues of government capacity for implementation. Leveraging the scholarship on the policy failure of gender mainstreaming, I highlighted the importance of an integrated approach to policy design and policy implementation that consider the prevalence of global gender equality policy-implementation gap and indicators of Canada's limited political will and institutional capacity for FFP.

The conceptual framework proposed by Wu et al. (2015) corresponds to decades of the scholarly focus on unevenly implemented policies of global gender equality agendas. The nine interconnected dimensions of policy capacity encompassed in their framework allowed me to highlight gaps in Canada's systematic, organizational and individual FFP capacity, as well as underline how seemingly disconnected policy gaps can exacerbate deeply political dynamics of agency, access, and voice. In highlighting policy capacity gaps, I employed Wu et al. (2015)'s framework as a heuristic device, enabling a snapshot of a constellation of actors involved in FFP and their (however dynamic) policy priorities. I summarized key emerging policy capacity gaps in [Table 5](#). In this way, I offered a model for more systems-oriented perspectives on Canada's FFP that are not there to supplant issue-specific policy analyses, but that help to interrogate broader capacity of Canada's policy ecosystem for feminist global engagement.

Policy capacity gaps outlined in this paper do not represent a finite or a fixed set of requisites for the Canada's FFP. Instead, they highlight areas of required intervention, as well as their interlinkages, allowing for more strategic policy entrepreneurship and institutional advocacy. For example, investments in GAC's organizational analytical capacity without an overhaul of its internal systems, but also a clear political mandate to transform Canada's global engagement, cannot be expected to solve the issue of ineffective bureaucracy currently under the Senate and ministerial scrutiny. While simultaneous interventions across all dimensions of policy capacity might not be possible, phasing out and synchronizing key interventions together is imperative for ensuring an effective reform this multi-sectoral policy project requires.

[Table 5](#) warns that the project of Canada's FFP is embedded in deeply fragmented, chronically underfunded, and analytically limited dimensions of policy capacity. Given the limited electoral consensus-seeking for feminist global commitments, FFP

Table 5. 9 dimensions of FFP policy capacity.

Individual analytical	Individual operational	Individual political
Prolonged and systemic underfunding erodes institutional actors' (across government, academia, and civil society organizations) analytical capacity Breaches of code of conduct within GAC and sexual assault and violence within Canada's military further erode these dimensions	Incompletely implemented government mergers lead to unclear bureaucratic mandates and stronger elected officials' oversight Breaches of code of conduct within GAC and sexual assault and violence within Canada's military further erode these dimensions	Frequent cabinet shuffles and delineated ministerial mandates limit ministerial but support prime ministers' area of intervention
Organizational analytical Investments in organizational strategic positioning, agile and adaptive planning, learning, and evidence-based analytics is long overdue	Organizational operational Institutions require updated decision-making and cross-divisional coordination processes to shift from realist to feminist ethics	Organizational political Consultative processes exist but require more accountability, inclusivity, and accessibility directly tied to FFP recommendations
Systemic analytical Reputable and stable, but fairly narrow, think-tank landscape	Systemic operational Divergent ministerial and government department mandates across FFP pillars	Systemic political Limited understanding of the popular support for FFP commitments
Underfunded academic institutions and professional training programs	Existing GBA+ offers helpful policy foundation for FFP but existing implementation gaps suggest likely capacity gaps	Divergent electoral promises across domestic and foreign policy positions

policymaking is subject to political volatility (government change but also party-level priority shifts). Moreover, existing political volatility (due to cabinet reshuffling) limits individual-political capacity for FFP entrepreneurship. Similarly, declining budgets across higher education, civil society policy analysis and advocacy, as well as transfer of organizational-institutional capacity to private consultancy firms, erode pluralistic analytical capacity of the system as a whole.

Decades of retroactive foreign policymaking have contributed to the de-prioritization of institutional (and by extension individual) capacity now required for FFP (particularly analytical capacity). Gaps, therefore, emerge across the pillars of inter-departmental (and inter-institutional) actors (e.g. between GAC and the Department of Defense but also civil society actors), within institutions (especially considering the unfinished merger through which GAC was produced), and in terms of specialized institutional analytical hubs (in government and non-government organizations). Addressing these gaps is both urgent and politically contentious, given the need to shift from the outdated realpolitik models of foreign policy and toward feminist ethics at the core of knowledge production, institutional analysis, and organizational and cross-organizational processes.

Lastly, addressing gaps across political, organizational, and individual dimensions of policy capacity requires deeply political (albeit seemingly technical policy) initiative. The institutional capacity to articulate and operationalize FFP is contingent upon the capacity of the Canadian government to coherently implement GBA+ across domestic and foreign policy pillars. This means strengthening institutional capacity and individual mandates to mainstream gender, (dis)ability, sexuality, economic and environmental justice. Such an approach would include political accountability for funding (of critical policy knowledge production and interventions across government, academic, and civil society institutions) that, as decades of feminist theory teach us, has deep racial, gender and class implications. At the risk of concluding the obvious, the status quo

(across political, organizational, and individual levels) cannot realistically orient Canada's foreign policy toward a truly feminist global engagement.

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