

Feminist Diplomacy Leads Canada's Engagement in Global Governance Under Justin Trudeau Administration

Zhang Tian hao

Anhui Normal University, Wuhu, China *corresponding author: Cao Shengsheng Email:Collin0121@outlook.com

Abstract: Since the 1940s, Canada has sought to shape its own distinctive style of diplomacy, with 'middle power' emerging as its diplomatic orientation. As a result, Canada began to explore a feminist diplomacy programme in the 1970s, and after the Harper government's formal attempts at feminist diplomacy at the turn of the century, the Trudeau government further developed its distinctive feminist diplomacy, championing feminism as a global issue. As a result, Canada has been actively involved in global governance, assisting Afghanistan in depth, and in the Trudeau era, using the United Nations platform to advance the cause of feminism globally. This has not only enhanced Canada's international reputation and diplomatic standing, but has also directly contributed to the continued development of gender equality and democracy assistance, and expanded the influence of the feminist cause globally.

Keywords: Canada; Middle Power; Feminist Diplomacy; Justin Trudeau; FIAP

1. Introduction

Canada is a country in the Group of Seven with a rather unique foreign policy. In the 1930s, the Dominion of Canada gained diplomatic independence from the Commonwealth. [1]Toward the end of World War II, Canada began to seek to carve out a place in international relations. After years of exploration in foreign policy and practice, it eventually evolved into the positioning of a "Middle Power" and gradually established its own distinctive diplomatic narrative.[2]By the time of the Justin Trudeau government, the Feminist Diplomacy agenda was explicitly formulated. Guided by this agenda, Canada has planned its foreign policy and actively sought to participate in global governance. "The Trudeau government has strived to place feminism at the center of all its foreign policies, and the status and level of attention it has accorded to feminism are unprecedented in the foreign practices of various countries." Such foreign policy choices and their impacts are worthy of in-depth exploration.

2. Literature review

Regarding research on changes in Canada's foreign policy, domestic scholars have already initiated pioneering investigations. Over the past decade, multiple Chinese scholars have conducted studies on the positioning, implementation, effectiveness, and prospects of Canada's "Middle Power" diplomacy, emphasizing Canada's continuous efforts to pursue diplomatic autonomy and propose foreign policy approaches with distinctive features and international appeal. Beyond China, the global research focus has more intensively centered on the "gender equality" perspective, examining the significant impact of gender issues on Canada's domestic and foreign affairs. This body of research can be broadly divided into two categories. The first category, from the perspective of policy formulation, explores the differing effects of women's rights in a broad sense throughout the evolution of Canada's foreign policy. The second category, against the backdrop of the ongoing deepening of the connotations of contemporary "gender equality," examines how Canada's Feminist Diplomacy has accordingly added new content and been endowed with new values. In summary, existing studies either have a narrow temporal scope or concentrate on analyzing the policy's effects within a specific region globally. In light of this, this paper intends to trace the trajectory of Canada's Feminist Diplomacy from a long historical timeframe and integrate relevant theories of current global governance to analyze its impact, aiming to enrich research on the sense of autonomy and gender dimension in "Middle Power" diplomatic practices in line with the times.

3.Canada's Dual-Track Diplomacy Centered on Feminism and Democracy Since the 1970s

3.1 The Gradual Establishment of Canada's "Middle Power" Diplomatic Positioning in the Post-War Era

The concept of "Middle Power" (MP) refers to nations with moderate global influence positioned between superpowers and smaller states. Canada's "Middle Power" status was not defined by explicit, detailed policy documents; rather, its establishment was a prolonged historical process shaped by Canada's efforts to break free from British diplomatic influence and forge a distinct path diverging from that of Britain and the U.S. Through its participation in the founding of the United Nations and post-war international relations negotiations, Canada progressively refined and solidified this diplomatic core—a "customary law" formed by long-standing practices. Canada first articulated the "Middle Power" concept in the post-war period[3] and formally positioned itself as a "Middle Power".[4] Discontented with the monopoly of the "Big Four" (the U.S., U.K., U.S.S.R., and China) in the post-war world, Canada consistently emphasized at the 1943 Moscow Conference, 1944 Dumbarton Oaks Conference, and 1945 San Francisco Conference that medium-sized states deserved greater voice. Guided by Mackenzie King's vision, Canada leveraged this status to elevate its international standing from the late 1940s through the Cold War,[5] deepening engagement in non-traditional competitive domains and advancing the modernization, democratization, and globalization of the global governance system, achieving notable results across various diplomatic areas.[6] Global governance emerged as Canada's most relied-upon diplomatic "hallmark," with an emphasis on the critical role of democratic assistance and gender equality in the global governance system becoming a key channel for exporting Canadian values and a core diplomatic principle.

This "Middle Power" positioning dominated Canada's participation in global governance from the post-Cold War era to the 21st century, with its influence manifesting in two dimensions. First, it propelled Canada to establish extensive partnerships with non-traditional powers. In the 1990s, then-Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy spearheaded Canada's active engagement with small and medium-sized states outside its traditional sphere, including Australia and New Zealand in the Asia-Pacific, and Norway and Sweden in Northern Europe. These relationships, termed "like-minded diplomacy"[7] (hereafter referred to as "aligned diplomacy"), aimed to reform existing international rules and create more representative institutions to integrate issues critical to small and medium-sized states into global governance. Second, it drove Canada to institutionalize multilateralism as a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Seeking to transcend its secondary ally status within NATO and the G7, Canada promoted a uniquely Canadian model of multilateral diplomacy while mitigating risks of decoupling from the U.S. Led by then-Finance Minister Paul Martin, the Canadian government persuaded the U.S. and other G7 members to establish the G20 Finance Ministers' Group, which later evolved into the G20 Leaders' Group.[8] This move bridged gaps with traditional powers like China and Russia, as well as developing states, preventing Canada's marginalization in global governance.[9] By 2005, Canada had become an indispensable player in global governance, further advancing its feminist diplomacy—a key component of its "Middle Power" strategy—to promote ideological and value exports. Through its "Middle Power" positioning and associated strategies like "aligned diplomacy" and multilateralism, Canada laid the groundwork for "dual-track diplomacy," paving the way for parallel advancement of democratic values and feminist diplomacy, and establishing the diplomatic tone for the mid-to-late 20th century and into the 21st century.

3.2 The Establishment of a Dual-Track Diplomacy Centered on Democracy and Feminism

Since the formalization of its "Middle Power" positioning, Canada's foreign policy and value exports have been structured around two parallel tracks: support for democratic values and advocacy for women's rights (1970-1980), which reinforced each other. In its diplomatic narrative, women's rights evolved after the 1980s, with the 1976 adoption of the Women in Development (WID) strategy serving as a foundational milestone. This strategy prioritized gender issues in national development—particularly in democracy and economic growth—aiming to empower women to participate equally in economic globalization by elevating their status and agency. However, WID later deviated, with its focus on "women's contribution to development" overshadowing the core issues of social equity and gender equality. To realign WID, Canada reoriented it toward Gender and Development (GAD).[10] The key shift was expanding the scope from narrow, homogeneous groups in domestic economic/political development and foreign democratic aid to addressing broader gender equality issues, aiming to rectify systemic gender discrimination and marginalization and emphasize equal participation in development.[11] When gender inequality was deeply entrenched in political, economic, and social systems and dominated societal norms, WID's targeted assistance proved insufficient. Thus, GAD reframed women's rights protection within the universal agenda of gender equality. Subsequently, to fulfill this diplomatic commitment, Canada elevated gender equality as its most representative diplomatic hallmark, actively promoting its dedication to global gender equality and democratic aid on the international stage. This gave rise to the Canadian International Development Agency's (CIDA) democratic assistance programs and the 2017 Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), which jointly advance Canada's overseas economic and democratic aid, as well as support for international feminist movements.

3.3 Institutional Framework Underpinning the "Dual-Track Diplomacy"

To better analyze how Canada's foreign policy operates, it is essential to clarify the institutional framework supporting its "dual-track diplomacy." Guided by "liberal feminism" since the 1970s, Canada has increasingly recognized marginalized groups, advocated for them internationally, and prioritized the advancement of women's rights as a cornerstone of development assistance. Unsurprisingly, CIDA's work has largely revolved around feminist movements. In 1999, the Canadian government formally adopted its first gender equality policy legislation, earning widespread international acclaim. By adopting feminist diplomacy, Canada identified its comparative advantage, gradually expanding its global influence and diplomatic appeal. Through this universal foreign policy, Canada won praise and support from developed nations and developing states with prominent women's issues, thereby securing discursive advantages in international diplomacy. Thus, Canada's feminist diplomacy from the early 1970s to the end of the century was a historically specific and internationally contingent policy with distinct Canadian characteristics. Its subsequent success and sustainability confirmed its viability, solidifying it as a long-term core foreign policy and further consolidating its status as a cornerstone of Canada's contemporary diplomatic agenda.

4. The Liberal Government's Inheritance and Advancement of Feminist Diplomacy Under Trudeau

Since the turn of the century, Canada's feminist diplomacy has undergone significant changes in implementation, primarily driven by two governing phases: the Conservative Harper government (2006-2015) and the Liberal Trudeau government (2015-present). Stephen Harper's Conservative Party government pursued a version of "liberal feminism" infused with its own style, initially emphasizing women's centrality and prioritizing maternal and child health. The growing diplomatic benefits of feminist foreign policy reinforced Harper's early commitment, leading to continued support for CIDA's foreign aid and feminist policies—exemplified by Canada's long-term feminist aid project in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. From 2001 to 2014, Canada provided over CAD 189 million in funding through CIDA and other agencies,[12] aiming to achieve Afghan women's liberation and gender equality through democratic aid—accounting for 17.4% of Canada's total aid to Afghanistan. However, by the later years of Harper's tenure, feminist diplomacy began to falter: declining focus on women's issues, unfulfilled policy commitments, and a shift toward conservatism marked this phase. The government rejected gender-positive stances, embraced anti-gender and anti-abortion positions,[13] reduced funding for feminist initiatives, and overlooked rising violence against Indigenous women and children.[14] These factors eroded Canada's feminist diplomatic reputation, damaging its international standing and domestic support.

As the Conservatives lost credibility, the Liberal Party seized on gender equality as a breakthrough, pledging to revive feminist diplomacy, deepen engagement with global governance, and campaign under the slogan "Canada is back." This strategy succeeded, with Justin Trudeau elected prime minister in 2015.

Upon taking office, the Trudeau government prioritized restoring Canada's leadership in global feminist diplomacy. Building on the previous government's record and the evolution of Canada's feminist movement, Trudeau's administration deepened its focus on gender equality, aligning with "critical feminism." In 2017, Canada launched the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP), building on CIDA's achievements and democratic aid outcomes, to solidify feminist diplomacy as a cornerstone of its global image. FIAP marked a shift to feminist-dominated democratic aid, committing at least 95% of bilateral aid to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. CIDA's prior "three-pronged" framework for gender equality[15]—promoting women's decision-making, combating gender-based violence, and fostering bilateral/multilateral partnerships—was expanded under FIAP to include a fourth pillar: "legal safeguards for gender equality and judicial access to promote equity." This redefined Canada's democratic aid priorities, shifting focus from governance institutions to feminist movements, with increased funding for global women's rights initiatives. Gender equality commitments became a defining feature of Trudeau's agenda.[16] While FIAP introduced innovations in wording and scope, it remained an extension of Canada's longstanding democratic aid and gender equality efforts.[17] Post-FIAP, Canada reduced support for democratic governance projects while increasing funding to UN and regional organizations, signaling a renewed global push to promote feminist universal values and shape international norms. Trudeau's policies on women's rights, gender-friendly reforms, and social equity reflected a tangible commitment to gender equality, aiming to reverse the Harper era's damage and justify prioritizing feminist action despite potential trade-offs. By intensifying implementation, diversifying stakeholders, and innovating methods, Canada elevated feminist diplomacy to unprecedented heights.[18]

The evolution of feminist diplomacy under Harper and Trudeau—particularly Trudeau's deepening global engagement—reflects a broader trend of integrating gender issues into security studies. This includes addressing gender equality, anti-discrimination, and the rights of marginalized gender groups as critical components of security. Analyzing feminist security through the lens of "threat" reveals women's security as integral to state security,[19] while avoiding reductionist framings of gender as merely a filter for "international" or "human" security.[20] Contemporary feminist scholars emphasize the interdependence of gender and security, framing gender inequality as a social construct rather than a natural order.[21] This has integrated gender securitization into academic discourse, with gender justice emerging as a core objective of feminist securitization and international relations democratization. Consensus on gender equality has thus become an international norm, inevitably influencing local practices. As gender equality gains prominence in global governance and states prioritize social equity, Canada's strong feminist foundation and Trudeau's need to restore trust post-Harper made feminist diplomacy an inevitable choice for Canada's post-2015 foreign policy.

5. Feminist Diplomacy Continues to Support Canada's Participation in Global Governance

Since forming government, Trudeau has deepened Canada's feminist diplomacy through extensive collaboration with the UN and international organizations, aiming to embed Canadian values in global diplomacy. To project its diplomatic ideals, Canada has prioritized the UN, the preeminent multilateral forum, with particular focus on gender equality and women's rights. Three key observations emerge from Canada's feminist diplomacy at the UN:

5.1 Global Leadership

Canada's feminist diplomacy is not a superficial attempt to showcase global governance credentials but a strategic path shaped by domestic realities, analysis of U.S. and ally interests, and international dynamics. It leverages "aligned diplomacy" to balance U.S. influence, secure independent agency, and gain leverage in human rights through multilateral forums.

5.2 Broadening Scope

Canada's feminist diplomacy is expanding its reach. Beyond narrow women's rights, it now supports diverse gender equality movements, engaging broader stakeholders—including political, economic, and social organizations—to amplify its global impact. Future trends include: (a) deepening partnerships with international organizations to advance multifaceted gender equality; (b) expanding protections to marginalized groups (e.g., 2SLGBTQI+ communities) and positioning Canada as a global human rights haven; and (c) prioritizing Indigenous gender equality to prevent rights abuses.

5.3 Group Synergy

"Aligned diplomacy" remains pivotal. For example, Canada's collaboration with Australia and New Zealand (CANZ Group) amplifies its voice on shared values, contributing to global democratic aid and gender equality movements. By framing feminist expansion as a contribution to global equity, Canada encourages non-Western states to join women's rights efforts, enhancing the universality of feminist diplomacy. In summary, Canada's feminist diplomacy—rooted in its "Middle Power" identity, shaped by historical evolution, and adapted to contemporary global challenges—continues to serve as a cornerstone of its foreign policy, driving its role in global governance and advancing its vision of a more equitable world.

6. Conclusion

As an embodiment of Canada's "Middle Power" diplomatic positioning at the level of specific policy, Canadian Feminist Diplomacy has made indelible contributions to constructing a contemporary, uniquely Canadian diplomatic narrative. Amidst the intense clashes of global multiculturalism today and the continual emergence of diverse gender issues, the unique value of Feminist Diplomacy has become increasingly prominent, further deeply integrating with Canada's "Middle Power" diplomatic positioning. From an internationalist perspective, the universal global values of Canada's Feminist Diplomacy have long profoundly influenced global governance, driving human society to continuously advance toward the key developmental goal of gender equality. The world today remains one where gender equality faces severe challenges and violations, with gender discrimination persisting chronically, and gender issues and feminism long confronting ongoing threats of de-securitization. During the Trudeau government era, Canada's adherence to foreign policy goals such as "gender and human rights equality, women's freedom, and social justice," its international aid objectives, and the efforts it has made in these areas will, in the future as global governance deepens and multilateral diplomatic cooperation intensifies, play an even more critical and positive role.

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