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Gender Mainstreaming in Canada and Mexico: Foreign policy and Childcare

Both Canada and Mexico have adopted commitments to gender mainstreaming in recent years, and feminist values represent an area of cooperation and convergence between the two countries, even if both have failed to entirely live up to feminist ideals. Two policy areas, childcare policy and foreign policy, illustrate some of the serious challenges Canada and Mexico face in implementing feminist priorities as well as some of the opportunities.

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Gender mainstreaming is an approach to policymaking that involves the integration of gender analysis into the construction of institutions, legislation, policies and with the objective of promoting gender equality, both domestically and internationally. There are various approaches to mainstreaming gender, ranging from a liberal integrationist to a more transformational approach. Many feminists argue that the liberal approach is problematic as it does not go beyond a reformist, top-down, state-led method, and thus fails to transform some of the underlying structures that support gender inequality. Both Canada and Mexico have adopted liberal versions of mainstreaming in both their foreign policies and childcare policies but not the more transformational and intersectional approaches that many feminists call for. However, we do see some

glimmers of more progressive approaches in both policy areas in both countries and some forms of convergence in policies.

This comparison is timely, as there has been a recent confluence of feminist foreign policy and care policy. In 2021, Mexico hosted the UN's Generation Equality initiative, an international forum designed to accelerate progress on gender equality and achievement of Sustainable Development Goal #5 on women's rights. It was in the space of that international meeting that the mobilization of a global care agenda began to take shape. The Mexican Women's Institute, InMujeres, and UN Women launched the Global Alliance for Care at the Generation Equality meeting in Mexico City. Canada has also been an important participant in these spaces. These global forums allow feminist activists and policy makers to "jump scale" to advocate and create policy discussions at the global scale, which in turn puts pressure on national governments. Both Canada and Mexico are members of the global coalition that includes 173 organizations, providing both countries with a symbolic reference point for both care policy and feminist foreign policy.

Childcare Policy

Childcare policy in Canada and Mexico has witnessed moments of policy convergence and divergence around the promotion of child welfare and female employment. In Canada, there was a longstanding feminist movement promoting affordable childcare to alleviate the heavy burden on women and support their ability to seek paid employment. What started in the 1970s with a call for universally funded childcare and women's rights, culminated in 2021 with the first federally funded childcare system. The 1970 Royal Commission on the Status of Women called for a national childcare program be established across the country to support the growing number of working women. In the 1970s, there was 30 per cent growth of women in the Canadian labour market. However, there was still little public support for funding a national childcare program for working mothers. By the mid-1980s, even with the growth to 60 per cent of women in the workforce, the discussion of childcare shifted into a debate over private vs non-profit care. It was only in the province of Quebec in 1997 that saw publicly funded childcare with a cost of

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\$5 day. During the early 2000s, the Liberals laid out a childcare plan but were unable to roll it out as they lost the 2006 election to the Conservative government of Stephen Harper. The Harper solution was the Universal Childcare Benefit, a taxable monthly cash-transfer allowance of \$100 for children under the age of six. It was billed as giving parents choice over their childcare decisions. This policy lasted for ten years while childcare costs soared for limited spaces.

The 2015 election of Justin Trudeau's Liberals reignited the women's movement's hope for a national childcare program, but little happened, in concrete terms, during his first term in government. It was a confluence of events during his second and third term in office that created the perfect conditions for a universal, publicly funded childcare program. These included a global pandemic that witnessed 100,000 Canadian women leaving the workforce, the crisis of childcare, and the election of women who supported the policy to positions of power. This included Chrystia Freeland, the Minister of Finance. In 2021, the federal government committed \$30 billion to the first federally funded childcare system. The funding was to be spent through bilateral agreements with the provinces and territories over a five-year period. This represented the most ambitious public commitment in Canada to childcare and women's employment. As argued by economist Armine Yalnizyan during the pandemic, "(t)here will be no recovery, macroeconomically speaking, without a 'she-covery,' and there can be no 'she-covery' without childcare,¹". However, this system was far from perfect. There were simply not enough childcare spaces to meet the demand.

In contrast, the 1917 Mexican Constitution provided working women with guarantees of childcare while they were employed but this provision was never fully enforced. The 1962 labor law required that the Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS) and the Mexican Institute for Social

Security and Services for State Workers (ISSSTE) provide formal sector workers access to childcare. However, this commitment was only extended for women working in the formal sector and there were no funding mechanisms available to establish and sustain childcare centers. The 1973 Social Security law addressed the funding problem by adding 1% contributions from all workers which created a mechanism for funding childcare spaces for women employed in the formal sector². These childcare spaces were only available to a limited number of Mexican families.

In response to increased entry of women into paid employment, partly because of the expansion of the *maquiladora* sector, it was a right-wing administration, Partido Acción Nacional president Felipe Calderón (2006-2010) that launched a new federally funded childcare program. In 2007, the program Estancias Infantiles para Apoyar a Madres Trabajadoras (EI), targeted to the low-income female labour force, was implemented and it continued during the PRI administration of Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018). The EI program represents a defamilialization of childcare work, taking the burden off mothers who performed the large majority of this work, and greater employment for childcare workers. The program was very popular; it was quickly rolled out throughout the country and had tremendous buy-in. The government footed 90% of the costs and by mid-2010, over 300,000 childcare spaces were created. The focus of the program was, however, on providing childcare spaces with less concern for the quality of those programs, and there were reported problems with corruption and health and safety. The 2009 ABC Day Care Fire in Hermosillo, Sonora which resulted in the deaths of 49 children shone a spotlight on the issue of safety and compliance. It thus failed to meet longstanding feminist demands for high-quality public provision of childcare. Nonetheless, the EI program put Mexico on the map for expanding childcare coverage and facilitating the inclusion of women into the labour market, many years ahead of the Canadian universal childcare plan brought in by Trudeau's Liberal government in 2021.

The populist left MORENA government of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO, 2018 to 2024) canceled the EI program and replaced childcare services with direct money transfers to single mothers and fathers. The AMLO government argued that the EI system was corrupt, unregulated, and unsafe for children and made continuous reference to the 2009 childcare fire. The reprivatization of Mexican

childcare resembles in many ways Canada's Universal Childcare Benefit of 2006-2015 under the Conservative Harper government. Both policies provided limited cash-transfers to families, but no support for childcare spaces to facilitate and maintain women's participation in the labour market. Neither program provided high quality early childhood education. In the Mexican case, without government funding support, many of the childcare centers created under the EI system were closed resulting in fewer childcare options for working low-income mothers. Grandparents have had to step in, or single mothers have had to exit from waged employment.

Both Canada and Mexico have adopted different forms of gender mainstreaming in childcare policies at different times, and both have struggled with tensions over funding, quality, and conflicting priorities. We see some feminist policy convergence between Canada's federal funded childcare system and Mexico's Estancias Infantiles program (2007-2018), although the Canadian program attempts to provide high quality care in addition to new funded spaces. We also see policy divergence on feminist gender goals during the Harper government in Canada as the Universal Child Care Benefit (2006-2015), provided cash to families while halting plans for a federally funded day care program. Similarly, AMLO's cash-transfers for childcare represents a re-familization of care and a backtracking of support for female labour market insertion. In Mexico, the model of cash-transfers social programs is not unique to childcare, the AMLO government has many social programs that are based on cash transfers. Nonetheless, AMLO's approval ratings have been consistently very high, and his cash-transfer social policies helped secure the victory of the MORENA party in 2024.

Feminist Foreign Policy

While childcare policy is a long-standing demand of feminist movements in both countries, the concept of feminist foreign policy (FFP) is a new and innovative approach to foreign policy development that mainstreams gender analysis and policies into a range of foreign policy issues including diplomacy, development assistance, trade, security and defense, migration policy, environmental policy and so forth. The term was first adopted by Sweden in 2014, and a range of other countries have since adopt-

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ed the concept, including Canada in 2017 and Mexico in 2020. These commitments aren't entirely new: both Canada and Mexico have long traditions of promoting gender equality and human rights in the international system—for example, Mexico was the host of the first UN Women's World Conference in 1973. Feminist foreign policies flow from both countries' commitments to the Beijing Plan of Action and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal #5 on gender equality. The Canada-Mexico Action Plan includes cooperation around the goal of "gender equality and women's empowerment" as a key priority for bilateral cooperation.

At the same time, we also see some serious incoherence between both countries' international commitments to gender equality and human rights and their actual practices, as in the case of missing and murdered indigenous women in Canada, and Canada's role in abroad in promoting its mining industry internationally, as well as Mexico's appalling record of violence against women and high rate of feminicides

Canada's FFP was adopted under the government of Liberal prime minister Justin Trudeau, a self-identified feminist who had adopted several initiatives to promote gender-sensitive policies, including the daycare policy. This policy was also extended to the international realm with the 2017 launch of Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP). In 2019, then-foreign minister François-Philippe Champagne announced that he would collaborate with civil society to develop a "white paper" on Canada's feminist foreign policy. Since that paper has never been published, FIAP remains the most prominent element of Canada's FFP. The government states the policy's goal is "to eradicate poverty and build a more peaceful, more inclusive and more prosperous world. Canada firmly believes that promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls is the most effective approach



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to achieving this goal." It includes support for sexual and reproductive health and rights (including contraception and abortion) in development programming and commits Canada to ensuring that 95% of Canada's bilateral development assistance "will either target or integrate gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls³".

As part of its broader FFP, Canada also supports commitments around the Women, Peace and Security agenda, including the 2017 Elsie Initiative, designed to increase the participation of women in UN peace operations, and an "inclusive trade agenda," which includes gender chapters in some free trade agreements, a "Gender based plus analysis" of all new and existing trade deals and mainstreaming of gender when possible into all provisions of trade deals.

Overall, Canada's FFP represents substantial progress in mainstreaming gender into foreign policy. However,

implementation of the policy is inconsistent, new resources have not been committed to achieving its goals, and it reflects a mix of different narratives, including both liberal and instrumentalist commitments combined with some more transformational rights-based rationales.

In contrast to the case of Canada, where prime minister Justin Trudeau had declared himself a feminist, Mexico's feminist foreign policy was adopted under a president, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, who had rejected the label of feminism and who had launched multiple attacks on women's organizations in his *mañaneras*. The policy was instead the brainchild of the former MORENA foreign minister, Marcelo Ebrard, who pledged his government's commitment to draft a FFP in September 2019 in a speech to 74th UN General Assembly. In January 2020 Ebrard announced the Mexican FFP at the annual meeting of Ambassadors and Consuls. Responsibility for the policy was housed in the foreign ministry (SRE) under Martha Delgado, Undersecretary for Multilateral Affairs and Human Rights.

When first announced, the policy emphasized heavily the need for reform within the SRE, such as integrating a gender perspective and feminist agenda into all aspects of Mexico's foreign policy and promoting gender parity and gender equality in the workplace in the SRE. It also highlighted the need to incorporate feminist leadership and women's contributions—especially women from Indigenous, Afro-descendant and other historically excluded groups—to the development of Mexico's foreign policy, and to ensure the inclusion of an intersectional feminist approach in all foreign policy actions.

After formally adopting the policy in 2020, Mexico went on to adopt its first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security in 2021, to co-host the Generation Equality Forum 2021 with France and UN Women, to launch the Global Alliance for Care, and to play a leading role in advancing a Gender and Climate Change agenda in the United Nations Conference of the Parties. Mexico also hosted the Shaping Feminist Foreign Policy meeting in July 2024. It thus quickly established itself as a leading voice on feminist foreign policy internationally and as a representative of the Global South in shaping FFP agendas. It also moved beyond more superficial reforms around representation of women in foreign policy positions to addressing some of the structural issues impeding progress on gender equality internationally. Even after Ebrard stepped down as foreign minister to launch his presiden-

tial campaign, the agenda was maintained and advanced under the next foreign minister, Alicia Bárcena.

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Conclusion

The timing could not be better for advancing a care agenda and a feminist foreign policy in Mexico. The historic electoral victory of Claudia Sheinbaum as the first female president-elect of Mexico on June 2, 2024, ushers in a six-year presidential term for her government to make good on its claims that the “fourth transformation” political project she leads can become a “feminist” movement. Weeks after her election, Sheinbaum was honored with an artisanal Oaxacan “women's baton of command,” which symbolizes confidence in the president-elect, but was accompanied with a mandate of “guaranteeing a life free of violence for all women,” ensuring equality of opportunities and guaranteeing women's right to health care⁴. There is a different scenario playing out in Canada. The next federal election is only a year away and Pierre Poilievre's Conservatives seem to be making gains in Canada. If they are elected, we are likely to see a weakening of support for gender mainstreaming and possibly a backtracking on some of the gains made in feminist foreign policy and the care agenda. ■■

Notes

¹ Jason Vermes, “Facing a ‘she-cession,’ federal child care funding needed to support women in the workforce, says expert”, CBC Radio, April 19, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/checkup/facing-a-she-cession-federal-child-care-funding-needed-to-support-women-in-the-workforce-says-expert-1.5992470>.

² Débora Lopreite and Laura Macdonald, “Gender and Latin American Welfare Regimes: Early Childhood Education and Care Policies in Argentina and Mexico,” *Social Politics*, Vol. 21, no. 1, 2014, pp. 80-102, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/541509/pdf>.

³ Government of Canada, “Canada's Feminist International Assistance Policy,” 2021, https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/issues_development-enjeux_developpement/priorities-priorites/policy-politique.aspx?lang=eng.

⁴ MNR Staff, Sheinbaum receives symbolic ‘women's baton of command’, June 26, 2024, <https://mexiconewsdaily.com/politics/sheinbaum-womens-baton-of-command/>.