

## THE UNITED NATIONS AND CANADA

# WHAT CANADA COULD AND SHOULD DO AT THE UNITED NATIONS 2018: A QUESTION OF LEADERSHIP

### Canada's Feminist Foreign Policy: Will it Travel to New York?

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“As a proud feminist, I am honoured to serve as Minister of Foreign Affairs in a government with an unabashedly feminist foreign policy that integrates gender equality into our diplomacy, trade, security and development efforts.”

[Chrystia Freeland](#), Minister of Foreign Affairs,  
International Women's Day (March 8), 2018

Canada has taken steps towards a feminist foreign policy. In June 2017 the government launched its [Feminist International Assistance Policy](#) (FIAP). A new, improved and updated [National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security](#) (CNAP) was released in November of that year. Reversing the stand of the previous government, Trudeau's Liberals have been staunch [defenders](#) of sexual and reproductive rights around the world. Canada's 'progressive trade agenda' has included efforts to incorporate [gender equality](#) considerations into trade agreements. The Government has [spoken](#) out on LGBTQ rights.

While these are undeniably important steps, there has not been cheering from all sides. Feminist critics have pointed out a lack of [policy coherence](#), asking if arms sales to Saudi Arabia are consistent with a feminist agenda. They have also stressed the [lack of resources](#) available to implement these ambitious policies. There are questions on whether or not actions have actually lived up to the policy ambitions. [Others](#), coming from a different perspective, have argued that championing these views and values will get in the way of achieving other Canadian foreign policy goals.

Unlike [Sweden](#), Canada has no over-arching document outlining its feminist foreign policy or what it means in practice. Canada's policy is evoked at some times (like International Women's Day, as seen in the opening quote) and is notably absent at others. For example, Minister Freeland's June 13, 2018 [speech](#) on receiving Foreign Policy's diplomat of the year award highlighted the importance of rules-based international order and preserving liberal democracies but was silent on feminism and women's rights.

Recent experience has shown that standing up for women's rights is not always easy. The 2018 summertime [blow up](#) around Minister Freeland's tweet on Saudi Arabia demonstrated that there can be costs to speaking out on women human rights defenders. It can also be lonely.

Turning to the Security Council, what would a feminist foreign policy mean for Canada at the United Nations?

First, it requires a clear and consistent policy agenda that truly "prioritizes gender equality and the rights of women and girls at its core," as stated in the CNAP. It requires diplomats across UN forums to understand gender dimensions of their files and speak out on these issues. A feminist approach does more than 'integrate women' into current processes. It involves challenging patriarchal structures (as Minister Freeland [noted](#) in March 2018 at a side event during the UN's Commission on the Status of Women). It also requires Canada to address inconsistencies in policy approaches to disarmament, militarization, and investments related to extractive industries.

Second, these feminist foreign policy priorities must be backed by key investments. A priority without money behind it is not a priority. Currently, Canadian efforts to lead on key issues are hampered by international assistance investments far [below](#) the 0.7% global target.

Canada would be well advised to promote key flagship issues at the UN. The [Elsie Initiative](#) is one example. Announced at the [2017 Peacekeeping Defence Ministerial](#), the Elsie Initiative aims to increase the number of women deployed in UN peacekeeping missions.

Yet one - or even two - initiatives do not a feminist foreign policy make. Canada could do more to support women's rights organizations (a key stated priority in both the CNAP and the FIAP).

Third, these global priorities need to be backed by consistent domestic performance. Canada cannot urge other countries to increase the number of women serving in peace support operations if we do not increase our own numbers. We cannot urge others to adopt a zero tolerance policy [towards sexual exploitation and abuse](#) by security forces and peacekeepers, if we are [not successful](#) in tackling sexist, racist and homophobic behaviour in the [RCMP](#) and [Canadian Armed Forces](#).

There are some who may argue that a full-on feminist foreign policy will hinder Canadian ambitions to win a Security Council seat. They may point out that outspoken advocacy for the rights of women and girls is not the way to win friends in the halls of the United Nations.

Yet it is important to remember that [Sweden was successful](#) in their Security Council bid - with their feminist foreign policy.