

The Marginalization of Canadian Civil Society Organizations and the Challenges of
Promoting Gender Equality under the Harper Conservatives (2006-2015)

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Abstract

Using a critical feminist lens, this major research paper examines the state of gender equality in Canada's foreign policy after a 10 year Conservative government reign. A review of feminist literature demonstrates an erasure of gender equality in foreign policy documents and a corresponding essentializing and instrumentalist discourse surrounding women and girls in key programming and policy. This literature review is enhanced by empirical research with Canadian civil society organizations (CSOs). Interviews with CSO representatives uncovered an overall trend of CSOs being marginalized from policy making between 2006 and 2015. Several core findings support this trend: (1) CSOs perceived a lack of overarching vision in the government approach to gender equality, a vision they were discouraged from constructively and publicly critiquing; (2) there was a freezing of the relationship between CSOs and the government; (3) the role of CSOs in policy making was being changed from advocate and partner to direct service provider; (4) CSOs began to implement new strategies for influence; and (5) CSOs were working in a unique political context whereby CSOs were disconnected from policy making. These findings highlight the overall failure on the part of the Harper Conservatives to promote a transformative agenda for gender equality within Canadian foreign policy.

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Introduction

Reviewing feminist literature and conducting empirical research, this major research paper (MRP) addresses three inter-related questions:

1. What was the context in which gender equality was promoted by and within Canada under the Harper Conservative government in the period 2006-2015, if at all;
2. To what extent had a discursive shift occurred in the language surrounding gender equality and what were the implications of this discursive shift in terms of: essentializing language, and the instrumentalization of women and girls for foreign policy purposes; and
3. How have these broader contextual processes and discursive/language shifts played out for those working on gender equality in civil society organizations (CSOs) in Canada: did the broader context affect the work of these CSOs?

In other words, this MRP focuses on how particular policy-oriented approaches translate into development practices. This paper hopes to determine if and how discursive and policy shifts on the part of the Conservative government (between 2006 and 2015) had practical implications in relation to how CSOs¹ were able to carry out their work.

¹ The Canadian Council for International Co-operation defines CSOs as comprising of “a vast range of organisational forms and sizes, identities and values--formal and informal voluntary organisations and NGOs, industrial, commercial and professional associations, not-for profit

Using a critical feminist lens, this paper examines the state of gender equality in Canadian foreign policy after a 10 year Conservative government reign. Evidence provided by scholarly literature on the erasure of gender equality in foreign policy documents (Brodie & Bakker, 2008; Tiessen, 2015a) combined with the essentializing and instrumentalist discourse (Swiss, 2012; Tiessen, 2015b) employed to frame the experiences of women and girls, highlights Canada's diminishing capacity and reputation as a champion of gender equality. While Canadian scholars (Brodie & Bakker, 2008; Carrier & Tiessen, 2013; Collins, 2009; Plewes & Kerr, 2010; Swiss, 2012; Swiss & Barry, 2015; Tiessen, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; Tiessen & Carrier, 2015; Tiessen & Tuckey, 2015), have documented and critiqued the decline of Canada's expertise on gender equality during this time frame, this paper uniquely highlights the perspectives and voices of CSOs directly impacted by this loss.

To carry out this analysis, 12 individuals from 11 Canadian CSOs working on gender equality were interviewed. The purpose of these interviews was to determine if and how governmental approaches to gender equality between 2006 and 2015 affected the work of Canadian CSOs. The interviews further investigated various strategies that these organizations employed to manoeuvre various political landscapes. These conversations revealed that CSO experts perceived themselves to be working within a rigid, prescribed context where space for constructive dissent had decreased significantly. Many individuals were concerned with the lack of a rights-based approach to gender equality and saw

academic, health and cultural institutions, unions, faith communities, social movements, self-help and community groups, and so on." (Canadian Council for International Co-operation, n/d, p.3)

the Harper government moving towards an archaic, charity-style approach to development, women's rights, and gender equality. Despite difficulties, CSOs continued to advocate for gender equality and women's rights by working in coalitions, increasing public awareness, and allying with key government officials. As one interviewee, Reese², affirms, "the work continues". The efforts of the CSO community were not, however, without significant challenges and setbacks. These challenges are examined here and reinforce the overarching trend of increased marginalization of CSOs under the Harper Conservatives, between 2006 and 2015.

Why Gender Equality?

One cannot deny that gender has been and continues to be a determinant of social and economic inequality. Terms such as the 'feminization of poverty' and the 'feminization of labour' have been coined to highlight the stark situation women face worldwide.³ The continued discrimination against and oppression of women on a global scale necessitates the need for collective action and political struggle. United Nations' Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3 formalizes the pursuit of gender equality on a global scale. Further, that "the presence of 'women and girls' is a priority – at least a rhetorical one – in nearly every funding sector and in the mainstream" (Arutyunova & Clark, 2013, p. 14) demonstrates that so-called women's issues and the pursuit of gender equality are on the

² Names of interviewees have been changed to gender-neutral pseudonyms

³ 'Feminization of poverty' refers to the unnerving statistic released by the United Nations that 70% of the world's 1.3 billion poor are women (Jaggar, 2001). Meanwhile, 'feminization of labour' explores the notion that the increasing globalization of production and the competitive quest for cheaper forms of labour have acted both to increase the number of women in the labour force as well as a deterioration of wages and working conditions (Moghadam, 2005).

global agenda. The analysis now turns to ensuring that these issues are framed in a way that advances women's rights and access to resources, not victimizing and undermining women's active participation in processes.

Gender and Development

After two decades of formal development policies, the 1970s saw a rise of practitioners, experts, and scholars questioning the impact of development projects, particularly, on women in the Global South. These questions translated into some donor agencies (with Canada being an early leader) creating Women in Development (WID) offices (Connelly, Li, MacDonald, & Parpart, 2000). The primary concern of the WID approach was not to question the development process itself, largely functioning under the assumption that Western countries were the epitome of development, but rather sought to integrate women into the existing development process.

WID asked vital questions about women's absence in the development process, enhanced the understanding of women's development needs, and revealed underlying assumptions surrounding development policy (Connelly et al., 2000; Stienstra, Sjolander, & Smith, 2003). Despite these advancements, WID faced criticisms and limitations, specifically surrounding its inability to address underlying causes of women's subordination (Connelly et al., 2000). From these criticisms, a new approach emerged – gender and development (GAD).

GAD takes the issues that WID brought to light and digs deeper to analyze the structures and conditions that impact women's position in societies. The

scope was broadened to include relationships between the genders, rather than a narrow focus on women. Under a GAD approach, the norms and distribution of power in societies are analyzed and disrupted in an attempt to not only meet the practical, short-term needs of individuals, but also to create long-term change to the structures and systems that favour some at the expense of others (Connelly et al., 2000).

This paper is based on the assumption that sustainable gender equality is best achieved using a transformative and political GAD approach. Unfortunately, as will be seen, the policies and programming of Canada's development institution, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development (DFATD)⁴, support the outdated WID approach. In particular, the policies of DFATD between 2006 and 2015 supported WID by treating women exclusively as vulnerable victims and targeting women with specific initiatives while neglecting to consider gender issues and power structures that may perpetuate challenges faced by women (and men).

The State of Gender Equality in Canadian Foreign Policy

Canada's international development institutions have had a tenuous relationship with gender equality. Once considered a global leader and innovator in gender equality, Canada, primarily, but not exclusively, under the leadership of the Harper Conservatives, has seemingly turned its back on the transformational

⁴ Until 2013, the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) led the distribution of humanitarian assistance. During this year, CIDA was folded into the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) to create the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development.

concept (Collins, 2009; Plewes & Kerr, 2010; Swiss, 2012; Tiessen, 2014; Tiessen & Carrier, 2015).

Canada's Past Leadership

Canada was an early leader in the 1970s WID approach and pushed the agenda by creating a comprehensive framework to involve women at all stages of the project cycle (Connelly et al., 2000; Tiessen, 2015a). Canada's commitment to gender equality continued with, among other actions, the 1981 ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the 1994 establishment of the WID and Gender Equity Division in the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)⁵. A pinnacle moment was the development of CIDA's 1999 Policy on Gender Equality. This policy was celebrated by scholars and CSOs alike for its progressive stance and long-term commitment to gender equality (Members of the Informal CSO Working Group on Women's Rights, 2009; Tiessen, 2014). Critiques surrounding its implementation have since emerged (see Bytown Consulting & C.A.C. International, 2008; Members of the Informal CSO Working Group on Women's Rights, 2009), but the Policy itself serves as a symbol of Canada's past commitment to the pursuit of gender equality in development processes.

The Discursive Shift

Perhaps the most striking example of the reversal of Canada's leadership on gender equality was the 2009 discursive shift from 'gender equality' to

⁵ See footnote 4

'equality between men and women'. This discursive shift was sudden and secretive, and its implications continue to be studied (see Swiss & Barry, 2015; Tiessen, 2015a; Tiessen & Carrier, 2015).

Coming to the public's attention via a leaked email, it was discovered that the Conservative government was "systematically changing the language employed by the foreign service" (Collins, 2009, p. 1). Public servants were directed to remove and discontinue the use of terms such as 'humanitarian', 'gender equality', and 'child soldier' in official government documents (Collins, 2009). Indeed, reports and proposals were returned with such language erased and replaced with wording approved by the Conservative government (Tiessen, 2015a).

This discursive shift was argued to be detrimental to Canadian foreign policy as it moved beyond political posturing – the shift occurred when the Conservative government was attempting to distance itself from Liberal Party terminology (Tiessen, 2015a). These changes shifted Canada away from language agreed upon on the global stage, at institutions such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (Collins, 2009). Further, these language changes were seen to "water down many of the very international human rights obligations Canada once fought to have adopted in conventions at the United Nations" (Collins, 2009, p. 1).

While all of the language changes are cause for concern, the changing of official language from 'gender equality' to 'equality between men and women' is of particular interest for this paper's purposes. This change has had profound

impacts, not only on Canada's approach to the promotion of women's rights around the world, but also on the internal workings of Canada's aid agency.

Interviewing seven midlevel CIDA or Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) bureaucrats, Tiessen (2015a) uncovered what she calls 'two CIDAs'. Two divergent approaches to development programming appeared to emerge, seemingly as a result of tension stemming from changing priorities and discourse at the senior-level and the commitments of mid-level 'femocrats'⁶. While the public face of DFATD was moving away from transformative gender equality, Tiessen (2015a) found a select number of staff members who were 'carrying the torch' of gender equality. She cautions, however, that transformative gender equality relied on individuals, rather than on the system itself. Tiessen warns that if "these dedicated individuals leave CIDA/DFATD... and if they are not replaced with practitioners equally committed to gender equality, it will be increasingly difficult to keep gender equality on the official, and unofficial, agenda of DFATD's development programs" (Tiessen, 2015a, p. 196).

Tiessen's study further reveals the internal strife that this discursive shift ignited. She notes that several individuals indicated an exodus of staff dedicated to gender equality, a fact that adds urgency to the author's aforementioned warning (Tiessen, 2015a). An article published in the Canadian foreign policy newspaper, *Embassy*, also demonstrates internal dissent. It was reported that staff at DFAIT, after learning of numerous foreign policy discursive changes

⁶ A word used by officials at the Filipino Commission on the Role of Women to describe a "bureaucrat whose work involves constant analysis of issues from the perspective of gender equality" (Rivington, 2014, p 6).

including the change made to gender equality, expressed concerns via email exchanges (Collins, 2009). It is clear that individuals within the public service were, and continue to be, pushing back against the direction in which the Harper Conservatives were pursuing foreign policy.

To some, learning that ‘gender equality’ was transformed into ‘equality between men and women’ may not be cause for alarm – the terms may seem to mean the same thing. Indeed, DFATD’s website equated the terms by writing: “gender equality, or equality between men and women” when outlining its approach to gender equality (Government of Canada, 2015). To better understand the difference between the two terms, we turn to Tiessen & Carrier (2015). At the core of the authors’ argument that there is, in fact, a difference between the terms is the notion that ‘equality between men and women’ has limited scope.

While both ‘gender equality’ and ‘equality between men and women’ advance the idea of equal rights and access to the same resources, ‘gender equality’ provides a deeper analysis of the results achieved when the same opportunities are provided (Tiessen & Carrier, 2015). It must be recognized that providing the same opportunities to men and women, may not produce equal rights. For example, this has been seen with the ‘triple burden’ of work experienced by women around the world. Many women are now expected and encouraged to participate in the formal economy, yet, due to the gender division of labour, unpaid domestic and community work still falls on the now working woman. Offering women economic opportunities akin to men, without challenging

social and power relations, has not resulted in equality. Rather, in many instances, women's lives have been made more difficult.

The use of 'equality between men and women' is exclusionary and ignores key identities and power structures. Unlike 'gender equality', 'equality between men and women' erases the existence of transgender individuals who do not identify within these two categories and also excludes the differences of girls and boys. Further, this limited term doesn't allow for the examination of how institutions, policies, practices are gendered in a way that privileges masculinity (Tiessen & Carrier, 2015).

Using the term 'gender equality' allows for a more nuanced approach to foreign policy. It is a term that encompasses in-depth analysis of "inequality between individuals and of the power relations that shape socially constructed roles and identities" (Tiessen & Carrier, 2015, p. 2). Indeed, gender is now used "to designate an analytical social category, one that interacts with other social factors in influencing life experiences of groups and individuals" (Reddock, 2000, p. 37). Rather than seeing a (false) dichotomy of men versus women, gender equality allows one to examine socially constructed hierarchies that impact individuals in complex ways (Tiessen & Carrier, 2015). Using 'equality between men and women' does not allow for this level of analysis.

By incorrectly equating these two terms and, more alarmingly, erasing 'gender equality' from policy and programming, DFATD is unable to analyze and implement policy and programs from a transformative lens. Rather, the status quo of damaging ideals of masculinity and femininity is not scrutinized and left

unchallenged. Relying on this simplistic and apolitical view of relations between men and women, key programs and policies have acted to essentialize and instrumentalize, rather than empower and support women and girls on a global scale.

Essentializing Language

By critically analyzing key foreign policy programming, we can begin to understand how a discursive shift at a policy level can influence approaches at the programming level. Studies (Carrier & Tiessen, 2013; Keast, 2015; Tiessen, 2015b, 2015c) do just that, focusing on flagship programs regarding women and girls, such as the Muskoka Initiative and Canada's National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (C-NAP). This research reveals the problematic way in which the Harper Conservatives viewed and portrayed women in the Global South.

Announced in 2010 while Canada was hosting the G8 summit, the Muskoka Initiative was Canada's response to the inadequate global focus on reaching MDG 5 – improving maternal health. Here, Canada pledged \$2.85 billion to maternal and child health programming from 2010 to 2015 (The Government of Canada, 2014c). This Initiative was focused on “improving nutrition, reducing the burden of disease, and strengthening health systems to deliver integrated and comprehensive health services for mothers and children at the local level” (The Government of Canada, 2014a).

Although Canada's leadership was originally praised, critiques from the public and historical allies, such as the United Kingdom and the United States,

quickly followed. These critiques focused on what was missing from the Initiative – family planning, specifically the lack of access to safe abortions, and the failure to address underlying causes of why women can't or don't access maternal health services in the first place (Plewes & Kerr, 2010).

Scholars (Carrier & Tiessen, 2013; Keast, 2015; Tiessen, 2015c) take these criticisms further and reveal the essentializing language that was used to 'other' women from the Global South and to portray the Harper Conservatives as having the authority and ability to 'save' them.

Analyzing official press releases, government documents, and ministerial speeches, it was discovered that women and mothers were repeatedly, and almost exclusively, referred to as 'vulnerable' and that their lives were 'in need of saving' (Keast, 2015; Tiessen, 2015c). Describing women this way erased their voices, undermined their expertise, and denied that women are active participants in and leaders of the quest for maternal health. Indeed, women's perspectives were not referenced in any of the texts surrounding maternal and child health (Tiessen, 2015c).

This undermining of women's role in maternal health served to elevate the Canadian government's status in the Initiative. These 'helpless' women were portrayed in direct contrast to the 'powerful' and 'legitimate' active agent – Canada. As Keast (2015) finds, assertive verbs describing Canada's, and particularly Stephen Harper's, actions surrounding maternal health were used to solidify Canada as the legitimate, credible leader with the authority and knowledge to act on maternal health. The consistent use of the words 'champion'

and 'leadership' when describing Canada's role in the Initiative make Canada the focal point rather than those in need of improved maternal health care (Keast, 2015). Again, women from the Global South were erased, their concerns and capabilities delegitimized.

Not only was the agency of women denied, the Muskoka Initiative failed to distinguish between women and mothers. Reviewing key government documents, (Tiessen, 2015c) discovers that women who were not described as either pregnant, lactating, breastfeeding, or poor and disadvantaged, were afforded little space within the frame of the Muskoka Initiative. This Initiative did not focus on women of reproductive age who were not, or who did not want to be, mothers. This brings up a critical question: "are only pregnant women and mothers worthy of sexual and reproductive health services?" (Tiessen, 2015c).

The Muskoka Initiative was directly impacted by the aforementioned discursive shift. Tiessen's (2015c) analysis notes, "throughout all of the texts, the most glaring omission was the failure to identify and address gender issues and gender inequality" (p. 15). This lack of gender analysis led to a simplistic approach to complex problems and undermined the lasting impact of the Muskoka Initiative itself. The factors contributing to women's inability to access maternal health services in the first place were left unanalyzed and therefore unchanged, and any existing power relations surrounding the family planning process were left untouched (Tiessen, 2015c).

Not only is a lack of gender analysis a disservice to (in this case) women, it threatens the sustainability of any results the Muskoka Initiative may have had.

This is puzzling as creating sustainable, long lasting results was a key theme found in the texts surrounding the Initiative (Tiessen, 2015c). This is nearly impossible without understanding and addressing gender inequality.

By promoting a simplistic view of relations between men and women and forcing gender inequality to remain unanalyzed, a focus on ‘equality between men and women’ made way for the Muskoka Initiative to portray women as vulnerable mothers in need of saving. Women have been reduced to their reproductive and biological capacity, their voices silenced and agency denied. Unfortunately, this portrayal of women was not unique to maternal, child, and newborn health initiatives; it was also found in Canada’s commitments to international security.

In 2010, Canada released its much-anticipated Action Plan for the Implementation of United Nations Security Resolutions on Women, Peace and Security (referred to here as the C-NAP). This Action Plan was created in direct response to a 2004 request from the UN Secretary-General for Member States to develop national implementation plans for Resolution 1325⁷. Coming 6 years after the official call for action plans, and several years after the release of comparable donor countries’ plans, the slow response to the UN’s call to action can itself be seen as Canada losing its grip on gender equality leadership (Tiessen, 2015b).

⁷ Resolution 1325 “reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security” (Office of the Special Advisor on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women, n.d.)

As was the case with the Muskoka Initiative, the C-NAP was directly impacted by the removal of 'gender equality' from the foreign policy lexicon. On one level, this shift impacted practical aspects of the C-NAP. As interviews with CIDA/DFAIT employees revealed, the C-NAP's release was delayed as references to gender equality were replaced with 'equality between men and women' (Tiessen, 2015b).

The discursive shift also impacted what was (or wasn't) included in the C-NAP. Reviewing Action Plans created by recognized gender equality leaders, including Finland, Germany, Norway, Switzerland, and the Netherlands, Tiessen (2015b) discovered that gender was exclusively defined and was crucial to the understanding of the experiences of women and girls, as well as men and boys. These definitions and understandings of gender allow these countries to analyze the various roles that all genders play in armed conflict and to further scrutinize how ideals of masculinity perpetrate conflict. Canada, on the other hand, neglected to explicitly define gender and instead reframed it to focus solely on empowerment of women and girls (Tiessen, 2015b). This focus ignores the needs and roles of boys and men and does little to analyze or address complex gender relations during conflict. Again, the sentiment of 'equality between men and women' was present and issues around gender (in)equality silenced.

The C-NAP contained similar essentializing language seen within documents surrounding the Muskoka Initiative. Women continued to be described as 'vulnerable victims' in need of assistance. They were commonly referred to in a group as 'women and children' again reinforcing women's primary

role as mothers (Tiessen, 2015b). Meanwhile, Tiessen (2015b) finds that men were consistently depicted as the ‘perpetrators’ of conflict. These portrayals actively ignore women’s positive and negative roles in conflicts as well as deny men’s victimization. Using this (false) dichotomy of men and women neglects a critique of the role that masculinities play in war and delegitimizes women as state-builders and active, political actors.

Under the guise of ‘equality between men and women’, flagship foreign policy programming has failed to adequately address the complex and, as can be the case with maternal health and in conflict, dire situations women and girls face. Reducing women to ‘vulnerable victims’ and “walking wombs” (Tiessen, 2015c, p. 18) is not a productive pursuit. Rather, it solidifies and encourages women’s unequal access to processes that directly affect them. This essentialization has led to another troubling trend in foreign policy: the instrumentalization of women and girls.

Instrumentalization for Foreign Policy Purposes

Since its beginnings, the purpose and priorities of CIDA (and now DFATD) have been torn between altruistic, cosmopolitan ideals, and realist motivations (Black & Tiessen, 2007; Swiss, 2012). Global trends, political leanings, and public vision interact to change the use of official development assistance (ODA) for humanitarian goals, for Canada’s national interest, or a combination of both. As Swiss (2012) sees it, realist ideals are currently highlighted, with a particular focus on security.

Reviewing patterns in the allocation of bilateral aid and drawing on interviews with CIDA officials, Swiss examines the hypothesis that as aid becomes instrumentalized for security reasons, more so-called 'altruistic' goals, in which gender equality is seemingly classified, become less of a priority. Here, it is found that ODA was in fact shifted to focus on countries in conflict or post-conflict situations and that this trend was seen on a global level.

Swiss finds evidence of waning support for gender equality via a 10% decrease in gender equality focused bilateral ODA between 2004 and 2008. Thus, he notes "[a]t the same time as special pools of funding are being created at DFAIT to address security and conflict issues, CIDA is pulling back from supporting more gender-specific programming and moving instead toward an approach dominated by mainstreaming and diminishing shares of ODA dedicated to [gender equality]" (Swiss, 2012, p. 149). Support for gender equality is not only falling as ODA is being instrumentalized, women and girls themselves are being instrumentalized for foreign policy purposes.

The Muskoka Initiative can again be critiqued in this regard. Announcing an initiative focusing on maternal, newborn, and child health while hosting the G8 summit was perceived as a "desire to put a Canadian stamp on a worthwhile initiative so as to generate prestige and positive reporting around the Summit" (Swiss, 2012, p. 142). Responding to a gap in the global response to maternal health is certainly noble, as is the concept of improving health care to mothers and children. At face value, the Initiative reads as a good news story. One can also see the political benefits of such an Initiative. By appealing to conservative

values, most notably refusing to include access to abortions, support for the Conservative Party within Canada could be solidified and built. The Conservatives used the seemingly uncontroversial issue and global stage to their political advantage.

Women and girls have also been used in security objectives to justify military intervention and to achieve broader, strategic security goals (Swiss, 2012; Tiessen & Tuckey, 2015). The casting of women, particularly those in the Global South, as ‘vulnerable victims in need of saving’, as explored in this paper earlier, has been advantageous as a means to justify Canadian military intervention. One does not have to look too far in the past to see that ‘liberating’ Afghan women was used to justify NATO’s 2001 military interference in Afghanistan (Swiss, 2012; see The Government of Canada, 2013, 2014b). This trend continues as the first area of focus listed in terms of Canada’s continued (non-combative) presence in Afghanistan is “supporting the advancement of Afghan women and girls” (The Government of Canada, 2015).

The Harper Conservatives instrumentalized women and girls for strategic and political purposes while simultaneously cutting rhetorical and financial support for gender equality. This occurred against a backdrop where women and girls were essentialized, arguably making it easier for the Conservative government to then instrumentalize women and girls of the Global South. Indeed, the discursive shift from ‘gender equality’ to ‘equality between men and women’ manifested itself in programming in a myriad of ways.

This paper has thus far focused primarily on the broader context as criticized by scholars and others in relation to Canada's approach to gender equality within foreign policy. I now move beyond this broader policy context to examine the *impacts* of this stated policy context, specifically the impact that the discursive shift, essentializing language, and instrumentalization of women and girls for foreign policy purposes had on Canadian CSOs.

Five key findings from interviews with CSO staff point to both direct and indirect effects of the changing policy context. These are examined below.

Researching Canadian Civil Society Organizations

The challenges of the shifting policy context as experienced by CSOs were raised at the 2014 *Workshop on Gendered Dissent, Democracy and the Law*. This workshop was held to report on challenges faced by advocates and CSOs working on issues of gender equality in Canada. Here participants identified a number of methods that the federal government had employed to restrict dissent, including the threat or revocation of charitable status, defunding, harassment/privacy violation, withholding information, interference with independent institutions, surveillance, and vilification/smearing (Van Wagner & Kamphuis, 2014). These findings, coupled with Tiessen's (2015a) research revealing internal dissent and an exodus of gender equality specialists from CIDA, led me to believe that Canada was at a defining moment in its history as a promoter of gender equality. I wondered how CSOs were faring in this difficult political environment.

My interviews set out to understand what barriers CSOs working on gender equality faced, how these barriers differed from those of previous regimes, and what strategies CSOs employed to manoeuvre within this environment. The interviews were conducted while the Harper Conservatives were still in power. The comments provided by the interview participants, therefore reflect that context, highlighting the role of the 'current government' of the Harper Conservatives. As such, the findings provide an important snapshot of Canadian policy-making and practice within a specific time period (2006-2015). The interviews were conducted toward the end of the Harper Conservative reign and provide a valuable point of departure for reflecting on a significant and substantial policy-shift in Canadian history (Collins, 2009; Tiessen & Carrier, 2015).

Completing empirical research was critical to exploring these topics. My research questions could not be answered using secondary data sources. The anonymity that my research method provided allowed for interviewees to speak about potentially controversial topics without fear of retribution. Further, I was searching for individual perspectives and strategies that would not be found in organizational or governmental documents. These voices have not been heard, yet are crucial to our understanding of the effects of the foreign policy changes to gender equality.

Methodology

Using my knowledge of organizations working in this field, I compiled a list of individuals working on gender equality in an international context. Similar to

Mullings (1999), the organizations were chosen based on my commitment to analyze the situation from a critical feminist perspective.

As this research is part of a larger study, ethics approval for completing interviews had previously been obtained.⁸ Individuals were contacted via email, with follow-up emails sent as necessary to invite them to participate in this study. ‘Snowballing’ also occurred in that some contacts provided me with other possible respondents that were then added to my list of potential interviewees (Desai & Potter, 2006).

Of the 26 individuals from 17 organizations contacted, I interviewed 12 individuals from 11 organizations. Interviews, ranging from 30 to 60 minutes, were held at the convenience of the participants and took place over a period of one month via telephone, Skype, and face-to-face.

The 11 organizations are located across Canada and vary in size and mandate, with seven organizations working specifically on women’s issues. The experience of the individuals also varied. Some had joined their organization as recently as two years ago and as long as 20. The majority of individuals had previous experience in the CSO sector and three had also worked in the public service at some point in their career.

⁸ This research was done as part of a larger study conducted by Dr. Rebecca Tiessen on “The Promotion of Gender Equality in Canadian Foreign Policy”. Dr. Tiessen’s larger study involves interviews with CSOs, government staff and policy discourse to examine the impact of the Harper Conservative government’s approach to gender equality between 2006 and 2015. Interviews with CSOs were approved through the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board as part of Dr. Tiessen’s larger study. Additional questions were asked of the CSO representatives in this study during the interviews. Specific questions were designated for my use in writing up the MRP. The data (including the interview transcripts), however, belong to Dr. Tiessen.

The interview guide (see Annex A) consisted of three sections and 19 open-ended questions. This guide ensured all topics were covered in a consistent way to create comparable qualitative data. I also encouraged participants to speak candidly and casually to frame the interview as a two-way conversation. This required the respondents to think in a reflexive manner and allowed them to express their experiences in their own terms, according to their own level of comfort. The interview was thus semi-structured.

This research technique allowed me, as the researcher, to have more control over the discussion than I would have in an unstructured interview. Further, unlike a structured interview or questionnaire where there is a fixed range of responses, the semi-structured interview allowed for the interviewee to respond using his or her own perspective. A wide range of responses to each question is thus produced (Ayres, 2008). Implementing a semi-structured interview method ensured that I covered the topics needed to answer my research questions, while providing the flexibility for interviewees to bring up issues that I, as an outsider to this CSO community, was unaware of (Desai & Potter, 2006).

Standardized questionnaires are unable to provide “an adequate explanation for the structures and processes that influence the strategies and behaviour of firms and industries” (Mullings, 1999, p. 338). In the case of my research, I wished to understand the strategies and behaviours of CSOs working on gender equality in an international context. A questionnaire would have allowed me to quantitatively analyze behaviours of my sample, for example

uncovering the number of organizations actively lobbying the government. However, the complexity behind the motivations to participate in this activity would have remained unknown (Mullings, 1999). Interviews were thus needed to uncover and interrogate said complex motivations.

Given my knowledge of the feminist critiques surrounding the changes to foreign policy in terms of gender equality, I came into the interviews with bias and a certain hypothesis of what the interviewees may discuss. As such, I diligently prepared my interview questions and guide to ensure my questions weren't leading and conducted myself in as neutral a manner as possible. However, as is inescapable with all interviews, I recognize that my choices of questions, as well as my (sub) conscious reactions, silences, and interactions with interviewees cause the answers to be "locally and collaboratively produced" (Rapley, 2001, p. 309). The responses are thus not formulated in a vacuum, but are a result of a specific interaction set up and facilitated by me as the interviewer. The data must be analysed as such.

The information provided by participants and candidness of their responses was further influenced by my temporary positionality in relation to the interviewees (Mullings, 1999). Given the openness and enthusiasm of most participants, I can assume I was viewed as unthreatening. The identity I disclosed, research assistant to a well-known academic within this community and Masters student at an accredited university, provided credibility to my research and an understanding of the framework from which I was analyzing this situation. This information, most likely, led to an ease and trust that may not have

been possible in other situations. The thoroughness of responses, information shared, and time spent during the interview would all be affected by how interviewees perceived me. Indeed, perhaps I was seen as a “temporary insider” (Mullings, 1999, p. 346) in their struggle to advance feminist agendas in Canadian foreign policy.

There are several limitations to this MRP that must be highlighted. The sample of participants chosen for interviews is small relative to the civil society community. Interviews with specific organizations such as Plan Canada were not carried out due to time constraints. Interview responses from other CSOs may indeed paint a different picture of the role of civil society-government relations under the Harper Conservatives. Nonetheless, interviews with 12 staff members from 11 CSOs in Canada offers a valuable overview of a wide scope of organizations that shared a similar message.

The interviews began by ensuring that the interviewees were aware of what this research would be used for and by assuring their confidentiality. I noted that the interviews would be recorded and emphasized the voluntary nature of their participation.

After obtaining verbal consent, I then proceeded by collecting personal information about the respondent. This allowed for a level of comfort to be established and for me to understand the background expertise of each individual. I learned of their organization’s understanding of gender equality, their own personal vision of gender equality, and how these informed one another. I was also able to analyze how these understandings and visions of gender

equality were similar or different from those of the broader policy context documented in the previously explored feminist scholarship.

We then spoke of the political context in which these individuals were working. I gained an understanding of where these CSO actors positioned themselves in relation to the government. I further determined the role these individuals played in influencing policy and the role they believed they should play.

Finally, we spoke of strategies the CSOs and individuals used, or did not use, to influence policy. Here I learned the traditional strategies of interacting with governments and, if these weren't successful, I saw the adaptability and creativity of CSOs. Indeed, CSOs came together across similarities and differences to push the government to expand its understanding of gender equality.

Findings

The findings of my discussions are divided into five sections to reflect (1) CSOs perspectives on how gender equality was promoted in the broader foreign policy context; (2) CSO relationships with the Conservative government, 2006-2015; (3) the changing role of CSOs in policy-making generally; (4) the variety of strategies CSOs undertake in various political contexts; (5) the uniqueness of the political context within the aforementioned timeframe.

The most striking observation I made was the unanimity of the responses. Although these organizations were working on different aspects of gender equality, using different visualizations and strategies to achieve it, they all

agreed: the Harper Conservatives were not doing enough to promote gender equality in foreign policy.

A Lack of an Overarching Vision

Many respondents lamented a lack of an overarching vision or policy for gender equality. While there were many initiatives and programs that could be seen as gender focused, such as the aforementioned Muskoka Initiative or the focus on early, child, and forced marriage, these were not implemented in a consistent or strategic manner. As Taylor⁹ reflected,

“I would say that it seems like the government has picked up some very narrow bands of what they would answer to the question of what are you doing about gender equality. There’s the [Muskoka Initiative] and some of these programs that the Foreign Affairs Minister and International Affairs Minister have lifted up and wag[ged] the flag at the UN or actually kind of focused some programming money... What’s missing, I think, is a bigger, more ambitious vision.”

Skyler shared the sentiment, revealing:

“My experience is that, internally within DFATD, both the development side and the policy side, there are champions of gender equality and I think they remain champions. I think there are challenges when it comes to vocalizing what those priorities should be at a higher, political level. I think that’s where the challenge lies. I think the approach that the ...government has taken is piecemeal. I think they’ve decided to prioritize certain issues, including early child and forced marriage, sexual violence in conflict, maternal, newborn and child health, without necessarily developing a more strategic and overarching policy that would guide that work from a gender perspective. I think it’s a real shame and I think it devalues the work that they’re doing on those issues because there’s no long term vision or underlying principles.”

Participants also expressed concern over the approach of these initiatives and programs. As such, these interviews demonstrated how those working on

⁹ Names of interviewees have been changed to gender-neutral pseudonyms

gender equality in a CSO context would have liked the government to understand gender equality. From their perspective, the government should have designed programs and policies using a rights-based approach.

“Even though they have some flagship programs and announcables, I think you can still criticize them for the lack of focus on women’s rights. It’s not a rights based approach. It has a very narrow perception of women and it is...almost paternalistic, women as victims, rather than looking at women as actors and agents supporting an autonomous women’s movement that could actually drive change” (Sam, interview).

Skyler agreed:

“The rhetoric around those [flagship initiatives] is saving vulnerable women. It’s utilitarian. It’s saying if we save these poor, helpless women from marriage, or from violence then they’ll be economic agents and be able to contribute to the economic development of their societies, rather than supporting these initiatives because women’s rights are human rights and funding them for what they are”.

Pat expanded this concern, noting that when women’s rights are present, there may be underlying motives attached. This participant also attributed a lack of a rights based approach to a fundamental misunderstanding of how to implement such an approach. From Pat’s perspective,

“there is an instrumentalization of gender equality and women’s rights in the sense that they appear as a consequence of other priorities, mainly the mother child initiative and to some degree the focus on women entrepreneurs and economic growth stream in CIDA.I think certainly among the political leadership of the Conservatives, but I would venture to say all of the political parties to some degree, there is very limited understanding of the dynamics of what is involved in undertaking a development cooperation program that has any reference point to rights”.

The interviews revealed a gap between the approach of the Harper Conservatives to gender equality and the one envisioned by CSOs. Pat’s questioning of the ability of any political party to create programs using a rights-

based framework is reflective of the concern of scholars (Hales, 2007; Swiss, 2012; Tiessen & Tuckey, 2015).

These academics highlight the global trends of neoliberalism, results-based management, and an increased focus on security to question whether DFATD can, as an institution, genuinely approach gender equality from a rights-based perspective. Each of these aspects is fundamentally at odds with the pursuit of gender equality. Neoliberalism, with a focus on market-based solutions and structural adjustment plans, has been shown to negatively affect women in a myriad of ways (Hales, 2007). A focus on results-based management that focuses on “performance, efficiency, and cost saving, might increase productivity and turnover of tangible gender equality programming, but will not adequately address deeply ingrained gender issues or attend to the rights, interests, and needs to those receiving the aid” (Tiessen & Tuckey, 2015, p195). Meanwhile, as seen in Swiss’s research, as foreign aid is instrumentalized for security purposes, seemingly ‘altruistic’ causes, by which gender equality is seemingly classified, are simultaneously instrumentalized and financially diminished.

These overarching trends mean one must understand that the gap between the approach endorsed by CSOs and that of the former government’s is not unique to the Harper Conservatives. That this party is no longer governing does not necessarily mean the approach to gender equality will automatically change. Indeed, many interviewed have worked through various regimes and have faced similar, and different, barriers under other political stripes. However, throughout the interviews it became clear that these individuals perceived that

they, and CSOs generally, were working within a much more restrictive environment when the Harper Conservatives were in power.

Freezing of CSO and Government Relationships

When I asked about the biggest obstacles faced since the Harper Conservatives had become the majority government, the overwhelming response referred to the erosion of the relationship between CSOs and the government, and the growing distrust between the two, with 11 of the 12 respondents referencing this situation unprompted.

“We’re part of the political dynamic that has been happening in Canada relating to those organizations that were playing a role in society of creating greater consciousness of these issues. ...much of this has been affected by this government and their policy of not funding their critics, as they would put it. As we would put it, governments have an obligation to fund citizen engagement in public policy, so it’s quite a legitimate thing for governments to actually promote and fund responsible promotion and research around these questions. That’s been, broadly speaking, a very significant barrier that’s been a product of this government” (Pat, interview).

The perceived decreased space for political dissent was indeed a widespread concern among Canadian charities. In 2012-13 the Canadian Revenue Agency (CRA) conducted political-activity audits against environmental charities that appeared to criticize the government’s stance on energy and pipelines. 60 charities, including those advocating against poverty, for human rights, and international aid, have now been subject to similar audits (Beeby, 2015).

While the Revenue Minister, at the time, denied any targeted audits, insisting the CRA operates at arms length and with no political direction, charities brought this case to the United Nations Human Rights Committee (Beeby, 2015).

Whether or not there had been an abuse of power or if the audits had indeed occurred randomly, CSOs and bureaucrats alike noted a considerable change in their relationship.

“We’ve seen the space to engage with government productively and to even disagree but in a constructive way, that space is just closed. ...We’ve seen a change. And certainly a freezing of relationships. ...We’ve never, as [an organization], had so little access. There used to be more access. More access to have an open relationship with government, more even ability to agree to disagree sometimes, much more of a constructive relationship. That’s just not there anymore There’s now a fear. The person who used to be my counterpart at DFATD was afraid to meet with me because I work at [organization]...certainly was afraid to come here and meet with me. It’s made it really hard to collaborate in a meaningful way” (Alex, interview).

Another interview respondent provides a similar sentiment:

“Even just meeting with government officials over the years, it’s been difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue around these issues. From our experience, we’ve had many meetings with the gender equality and human development team over the years within CIDA and now DFATD. There’s almost a hesitation to meet with us, a reluctance to let it be known that they’re meeting with us, we’re seen as a dangerous partner – not even a partner. We cause trouble for the government because we criticize them for not adopting a human rights based approach or recognizing women’s rights within the context of the initiatives” (Skyler, interview).

This ‘freezing of relationships’ is particularly concerning given the research of Hendriks (2005) and Tiessen (2005). Both scholars seek to understand how the (then) 30-year theory of GAD has been (successfully or unsuccessfully) turned into practice within international and Canadian development institutions.

Despite different methodologies, with Tiessen (2005) completing document reviews, case study analysis, and empirical research with NGOs in Malawi, and Hendriks (2005) interviewing gender specialists within Canadian development organizations, their findings are strikingly similar. Both studies

highlight that GAD, and gender mainstreaming specifically, has translated into technical and apolitical solutions that do little to challenge the patriarchal status quo.

Popularized at the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women, gender mainstreaming is considered to be a “globally accepted strategy for promoting gender equality” (UN Women, n.d.). It is a process in which a gender equality analysis is brought to all of an organization’s policies and programs (Hendriks, 2005). The United Nations Economic and Social Council (UNESCO) articulated a more thorough definition in 1997:

“Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality” (UNESCO, 1997, p. 2).

From a technical and practical point of view, gender mainstreaming may entail hiring more women staff, holding gender-focused trainings, developing gender guidelines and analytical frameworks, implementing institutional gender policies, budgeting for gender-specific or related activities, and gender reporting mechanisms (Hendriks, 2005; Tiessen, 2005). While these technical solutions are acknowledged as entry points for discussion, feminists (Barnes, 2006; Basini, 2013; Benschop & Verloo, 2006; Charlesworth, 2005; Hendriks, 2005; Joachim & Schneiker, 2012; Moser & Moser, 2005; Parpart, 2014; Tiessen, 2005; True, 2003) have long critiqued the use of gender mainstreaming in a variety of

institutions that rely on such technical solutions as a means of achieving gender equality. Indeed, a critical feminist lens has shown that gender mainstreaming has been, thus far, largely ineffective in sparking the political change necessary for promoting gender equality in development institutions.

Canadian international development organizations, specifically CIDA and DFATD, are not immune to this critique. In the 2008 *Evaluation of CIDA's Implementation of Its Policy on Gender Equality*, it was revealed that, despite institutional commitments to gender equality and gender mainstreaming, CIDA was not advancing gender equality in a substantial manner (Bytown Consulting & C.A.C. International, 2008). A combination of insufficient human and financial resources, a lack of a corporate view of and strategy for gender equality, inconsistent senior-level commitment, and poor analytical and coding frameworks led to only 13 percent of CIDA professional staff and managers believing that “[gender equality] results achieved through the Agency’s investments are sustainable” (Bytown Consulting & C.A.C. International, 2008, p. 18).

Further critiques provided by Members of the Informal CSO Working Group on Women’s Rights (2009) point to the gendered nature in which CIDA treats investments within sectors. Here, the group’s analysis finds that “investments in the education and health sectors were deemed more [gender equality] designated than investments in other sectors” (Members of the Informal CSO Working Group on Women’s Rights, 2009, p. 8). This demonstrates that, in practice, gender equality isn’t a crosscutting consideration in all sectors, but is more focused on in so-called ‘feminine’ sectors.

Academic research has also critiqued CIDA and DFATD's practice of gender mainstreaming and ability to promote gender equality. Specifically, Tiessen (2015a) notes that "despite the committed efforts of many CIDA staff members, implementing short-term, technical projects rarely resulted in the agency addressing the political and attitudinal changes necessary for advancing gender equality" (p. 200). The work of Tiessen & Carrier (2015) demonstrates that, in part, due to the 'gender equality' - 'equality between men and women' discursive shift, the tendency to focus on short term, technical projects within DFATD is increasing. Indeed, "gender-responsive programming has lost popularity among Canadian ministerial staff because it does not allow for bean-counting of beneficiaries" (Tiessen & Carrier, 2015, p. 14).

The aforementioned analyses demonstrate that a commitment to and implementation of gender equality and gender mainstreaming within DFATD is itself gendered, inconsistent, highly technical and focused on short-term results, and not systemic. Of particular importance to this research, is the lack of a systemic approach to gender equality within DFATD.

As seen in the aforementioned findings of Tiessen (2015a), gender equality is being promoted within DFATD by individuals rather than the institution. Despite challenging bureaucratic and organizational culture, these so-called 'femocrats' and 'insider activists' (Banaszak, 2009) push progressive, feminist goals forward through a variety of strategies (Hendriks, 2005; Tiessen, 2005). The transformative potential for gender mainstreaming, for instance, to create

“feminist space in development is partially dependent upon the perspective and political identity of gender practitioners” (Hendriks, 2005, p. 623).

Hendriks (2005) and Tiessen (2005) explore the overt and subtle strategies employed by gender practitioners to advance feminist goals. Resistance, silence, altering discourse, politicizing social relations, compromising, manipulating budgets, and employing instrumentalist arguments were all seen to be strategies utilized by insider activists to enhance feminist agendas in development organizations (Hendriks, 2005; Tiessen, 2005). Studying these strategies is important as it “fosters a better understanding of the barriers to gender equality and gender mainstreaming” (Tiessen, 2005, p. 715). However, both authors warn of the inability of many of these strategies to result in transformative and political change and see these approaches primarily as reactions to complex environments (Hendriks, 2005; Tiessen, 2005). As such, the importance of networks and coalitions is highlighted.

Again, although working in different contexts, Hendriks (2005) and Tiessen (2005) come to the same conclusion - feminist gender practitioners working within development organizations are highly constrained and connections with the broader women’s movement are essential to creating feminist spaces within these organizations. Networks and coalitions among feminists within organizations are deemed crucial to share technical solutions and subtle strategies, find solidarity and role models, and to provide space for reflection and analysis (Tiessen, 2005). Links to the external feminist movement, although complicated, are crucial for insider activists to remain political and critical as they

push the boundaries of mainstream systems (Hendriks, 2005). Further, it is recognized that these gender practitioners cannot “infuse mainstream development with feminist goals, ideals, and principles in isolation from outside pressure for change” (Hendriks, 2005, p. 631).

Putting together the findings of Hendriks (2005) and Tiessen (2005; 2015a) with my discussions with Canadian CSOs, the dire situation of gender equality in Canadian foreign policy becomes clear. We are losing the progressive, feminist gender practitioners that push transformative gender equality forward in lieu of an institutional commitment (Tiessen, 2015a). For those individuals that do remain, the critical and essential link between them and the women’s movement was severed as the relationship between CSOs and the government was challenged. The implications of this situation are paramount. Without insider activists and without the link to progressive CSOs, how will transformative gender equality be promoted in Canada’s development institutions?

Changing of CSO Role in Policy Making

The interviews revealed the position that respondents believe CSOs should have as policy influencers. It became clear these CSOs do not view themselves simply as service providers, existing to administer government programs. Rather, from their perspective, CSOs should have an active advocacy role in shaping and challenging policy. The interviewees expressed a desire to have their organizations seen as partners, working with government to create sound policy according to their areas of expertise. Their responses reflect a

perspective of past governments that did, in fact, view CSOs in this regard.

Jamie explicitly refers to a more promising past government approach:

“[Past governments] considered NGOs as partners in development and were interested in our practice and what we thought and what we did, what partners we worked with, interested in our approaches and they were interested in funding that kind of work as partners.”

Another factor in this shifting role is the change to funding mechanisms. Most of the CSOs, 9 out of 11, interviewed did not receive funding from DFATD. Four would not receive monies from any form of government as they wish to maintain their independence. Five would, in theory, have solicited the government for funding, but chose not to either because of the mismatch of government priorities with their own or because of the new funding structure itself. As Taylor describes, “they have this new system of these calls for proposals and most of them haven’t related to our work and we haven’t really wanted to chase government funding that isn’t connected to what we’re doing.” Both organizations that continued to receive funding noted increased difficulties in doing so.

“It is more challenging, and not just for (organization) but many more organizations. There are very few call outs and people are all sort of waiting. Then it’s this competitive bidding which I think is sort of counter productive to long term development and international cooperation” (Reese, interview).

Jamie spoke in depth about how the process changed and of particular importance was the loss of the Partnership Branch in 2010. It was through this branch that this organization received most of its funding. The organization would envision a project, create a proposal, and CIDA would approve funding for it.

Now, DFATD is the primary driver of project creation, developing projects and soliciting organizations via request for proposals to administer the program.

Skyler believes, “the only reason why NGOs get funding in Canada is to do direct service provision. Which, to me, is an archaic way of doing development”. Again, there is a gap between how CSOs view their role as partners and experts in the development policy process and the role the Harper Conservatives ‘allowed’ them to have.

CSOs play a vital role in influencing policy and pushing for change. In a recent statement at the Clinton Global Initiative, United States president Barack Obama praised the work of civil society leaders stating that, “[w]hen people are free to speak their minds and hold their leaders accountable, governments are more responsive and more effective,” further remarking that, “[w]hen citizens are free to organize and work together across borders to make our communities healthier, our environment cleaner, and our world safer, that's when real change comes” (Obama, 2014).

The vision of civil society as a crucial component to democracy stems from liberal thinkers such as Alexis de Tocqueville, Samuel Huntington, and Robert Putnam (Mercer, 2002). Here it is theorized that for a liberal democracy to function, a vibrant civil society, accessing the viewpoints and demands of different, and often marginalized, interest groups, is crucial to protect against abuses of state power (Diamond, 1994). Civil society “not only restricts state power, but legitimates state authority when that authority is based on the rule of law” (Diamond, 1994, p. 5). When civil society plays a key role in “the

consolidation of democracy, in checking abuses of state power, preventing the resumption of power by authoritarian governments and encouraging wider citizen participation and public scrutiny of the state,” (Mercer, 2002, p. 8) the state, itself, is strengthened and legitimized. In this view, civil society acts as a separate and watchful entity, but still engages with and is respectful of the authority of the state.

In a perhaps more radical view, civil society can be a place where citizens engage with and theorize other forms of societies and ways of life. Here, civil society is “the realm of emancipation, of alternative imaginations of economic and social relations, and of ideological contest” (Howell & Pearce, 2001, p. 8). Civil society, thus, exists in and of itself, and is not entirely defined by its relationship to the state.

The roles that CSOs play in society are dependent on political and economic frameworks. From a neoliberal perspective, as the role of the state in society shrinks, civil society flourishes as the “self-regulation arena of the private economic individual” (Howell & Pearce, 2001, pg. 8). CSOs, in particular NGOs, replace state actors as direct service providers and begin to take up greater roles in social welfare activities.

This role is problematic for numerous reasons. If CSOs are functioning as a replacement to the state and are responding to market pressures, the ability to both engage politically and to represent the interests of the disenfranchised is greatly diminished (Mercer, 2002). For example, responding to prescribed funding as set out by international financial institutions, states, and donors, the

number of NGOs with little to no political agenda has proliferated since the 1980s (Mercer, 2002). In this sense, CSOs are de-radicalized and co-opted into maintaining the status quo. Further, as the neoliberal focus on efficiency and results increases, these organizations may be unable, or unwilling, to engage with society's most disenfranchised. These NGOs become more responsive and accountable to donors to demonstrate results, rather than focusing on and being accountable to those who they are purportedly serving (Mercer, 2002).

As evidenced by conversations with these Canadian CSOs, the tendency of the Harper Conservatives was to fund organizations for direct service provision and to defund for political activity. This funding preference, coupled with the freezing of relationships between the state and CSOs threatens the facets of (liberal) democracy as explored previously.

New Strategies for Influence

Throughout my discussions, it became increasingly clear these CSOs were facing a difficult political context where individuals were frustrated about the approach the government had taken towards gender equality and the role organizations were (not) able to play. However, it was also evident that these individuals and the organizations they work for had no intention of stopping the work they do. This led me to explore the strategies that various organizations undertake to continue their work.

Many individuals spoke about the 'traditional' modes of advocacy and working with the government. These included meetings with government and political officials, writing letters, bringing partners from the Global South to speak

to Members of Parliament, and providing resources and reports to government officials. Although organizations hadn't completely abandoned these methods, for reasons outlined previously, these strategies became less viable.

As Chris laments, "[the government is] no longer interested in meeting with representatives from NGOs and in terms of the letters we've written, we've had no response of any significance. So what's the point?" Sam concurs stating,

"We've written...three or four letters and we haven't had a single response - letters to the minister, Minister Baird and now Minister Nicholson. I don't know what the message is – you're not important enough to engage with. We haven't even gotten a 'thank you for your letter' letter, which I don't understand".

Given the reluctance of the Harper Conservatives to engage with CSOs, specifically those challenging their approaches to gender equality, organizations shifted their focus elsewhere.

"We're in a complex political frame for women, domestically and internationally, but that doesn't mean Canadians don't care about it. We're just going to circumvent the government in some ways and prove to ourselves that Canadians really do care, that the fundamentalness of human rights is essential to the Canadian identity and we're going to tap into that in order to raise resources and voice for women and girls" (Jordan, interview).

Taylor's organization also put more focus on the public, stating, "we have put more emphasis on public awareness campaigns lately because we knew that getting change through parliament is a fairly limited strategy at the moment".

Along with an increased focus on public awareness, organizations came together, finding power in numbers, building off each other's strengths, and filling in gaps.

"I am finding that the coalition work is incredibly important, in particular with this government climate and when so many organizations have had

their funding cut. I found that some of the organizations are at the point where they can only do front line service provision and they no longer have the ability to engage in advocacy because they risk losing further funding or they just don't have human capacity to take on any capacity. I'm finding that those of us who are left, who can do advocacy, our role is even more important than ever and working in coalition is really a way to harness that voice and also give opportunities to organizations who are only doing front line provisions right now" (Alex, interview).

A similar argument pertaining to the importance of coalitions and networking arose, with another interview respondent noting:

"I think there's value in [networks] and I think more and more in this political context. I think it's important to work in networks, particularly advocacy work. If we can send a letter that is signed by several organizations, there's strength in that and organizations are less exposed" (Reese, interview).

Indeed, respondents identified many benefits to working in networks and coalitions. Morgan reflects, "we're just one small organization and we have one particular focus. If we've had any success, it's because we partnered with really credible organizations". Jamie highlights the

"synergistic value of people working on similar or even the same things, putting their efforts together and having the sum greater than the parts...The solidarity value is definitely huge and I think just the moving things forward, keeping it moving – it's a mix of synergy and solidarity [that's] of great value".

Jordan expresses,

"this is what the women's movement is built on. It's built on women and volunteers and people giving their evenings up to write important documents and notes and analysis and critiques of what's going wrong. ...there's community of practice, sense of community, there are all those pieces that are broad assets to working in collaboration and I think the women's movement does that really well because of that necessity. We forage the most unlikely collaborations to get shit done".

That is not to imply that working in coalitions and networks is easy. A few respondents spoke to the difficulty of trying to reach consensus and noted the

time commitments and patience needed to work within coalitions. Alex reflected on working on contentious topics, recognizing that, “we’re not always on the same page on issues. Last year on sex work, it was hard being in the same room, it was uncomfortable”. Despite this, it was clear these organizations found great value in coalition building and increasingly relied on this strategy during a challenging political time.

A Unique Political Context

These interviews revealed a fundamental disconnect between the Harper Conservatives and CSOs working on gender equality. This disconnect is apparent in the approach to gender equality that the Conservative government took and also how they viewed the role of CSOs. It is important to consider, however, if this disconnect was unique to this regime. To understand this, I asked the interviewees to reflect on the barriers they faced when promoting gender equality prior to the Conservatives taking majority rule.

When individuals reflected on past regimes, many concluded that simply getting the issues on the table was the biggest obstacle. Jamie recalls that, “gender equality and women’s rights certainly wasn’t on everyone’s lips as it is now.... I’d say the biggest obstacle was that it was not seen as the 5 alarm fire that it is”. Reese reflects that “there have been challenges to gender equality. Challenges in making those issues a priority. We’ve always had to push to make those issues a priority. That’s the history of the women’s movement. That’s the history of any group that’s been marginalized or oppressed”.

That the issues were on the policy agenda could be seen as a victory. When asked what the Harper Conservatives were doing well in terms of gender equality, a few respondents were pleased to see that issues that impact the rights of women and girls, such as gender-based violence, maternal health, and early and forced marriage had the government's attention. These respondents were hopeful that having these issues on the agenda could act as entry points for a broader action. As Jordan sees it:

“those are opportunities ...when you talk about early and forced marriage, you can talk about the really scary things around early and forced marriage. You can talk about trafficking, female genital mutilation, sexual violence, domestic violence, the legal frameworks that exist that prevent women from running away from an abusive marriage, you can talk about many different things”.

Among respondents, however, this viewpoint was not unanimous. Taylor commented,

[the government has] these narrow slices that, depending on how you view them - I guess some people would see them as ‘oh great we can build up. It’s a foundation on which to build a more ambitious agenda’ whereas others would say ‘no it’s just cherry picking a few issues and then using it to deflect calls for a broader agenda’ ...I don’t think that we can leverage that to open up all these other doors. I’m more concerned that there’s a certain ideological drive and that these principles around gender equality don’t run very deep”.

It was also noted that attention to these issues was occurring on a global scale – it was not just the Conservative government putting more focus on women and girls. Organizations and individuals within, and outside of, the women’s movement have tactfully used social media to highlight the continued and devastating pervasiveness of global gender inequality. Indeed, previously

unheard voices, stories, and perspectives are now more accessible to a wider audience. This has arguably increased the visibility and prominence of feminism and the pursuit of gender equality in many societies, Canada included. It is difficult to hypothesize whether or not these issues would be on the agenda regardless of the government of the day. Respondents recognized this, with Jamie remarking, “if you think about the partnership approach we had before, if that could have continued and now that there’s all this interest in the world, that would have been great”.

Thus, respondents appear to believe that the disconnect, in terms of the role that CSOs play in policy making, that existed between CSOs and the government was, in fact, unique to the Harper Conservatives. While previous governments had shortfalls and created barriers when it came to promoting gender equality, CSOs perceived that they had a place as a partner to constructively critique the government’s approach to push the agenda forward. This space, CSO representatives argued, drastically decreased. As a result, the findings from this MRP highlight an increasing marginalization of CSOs from policy making under the Harper Conservatives between 2006 and 2015.

Conclusion

Several important findings were uncovered during interviews with representatives from CSOs. These findings reflect CSOs perspectives on how gender equality was promoted in the broader foreign policy context, CSO relationships with the Conservative government between 2006 and 2015, and their role in policy-making generally. The findings further demonstrate the variety

of strategies CSOs undertake in various political contexts and explore the uniqueness of the political context during the aforementioned timeframe. The discussions point to an important larger trend of the marginalization of the civil society community from policy making under the Harper Conservatives. This MRP has documented how this has happened and the perceived implications of this trend from the perspective of CSO staff members advocating for gender equality. Several key questions guided the research and analysis for this MRP: (1) what is the context in which gender equality was promoted by and within Canada under the Harper Conservative government in the period 2006-2015, if at all; (2) to what extent had a discursive shift occurred in the language surrounding gender equality and what were the implications of this discursive shift in terms of: essentializing language, and instrumentalization of women and girls for foreign policy purposes; and (3) how did these broader contextual processes and discursive/language shifts play out for those Canadian CSOs working on gender equality.

A review of feminist literature spoke to the former two questions. The promotion of gender equality within foreign policy is currently under siege. The 2009 discursive shift where 'gender equality' was replaced with 'equality between men and women' had, and continues to have, profound impacts. 'Femocrats' exited in revolt and policies and programmes are now used to essentialize and instrumentalize women and girls. The review demonstrated that the discursive shift did indeed impact gender equality programming. However, the literature was

unable to tell us how organizations working on gender equality in an international context were impacted. This paper attempted to fill that gap.

Research with CSOs revealed that the discursive change and resulting shift in vision, policy, and programming drastically impacted their ability to promote gender equality. The essentializing language and instrumentalization of women and girls did not go unnoticed and these CSOs pushed back against this approach to continue to promote gender equality. My findings demonstrate that these CSOs called for a more transformative and rights-based agenda – fully funded and comprehensive gender policies and programs that see women as active agents, not as wombs or vulnerable victims.

Due to a disconnect between the role these CSOs believe they should have and the one envisioned by the Conservative government between 2006 and 2015, pushing this transformative agenda forward was extremely difficult. CSOs faced numerous challenges in their efforts to advocate for gender equality; notably: reduced funding opportunities, increased scrutiny, and a top-down approach to policy and program development as a means to reduce the CSO function to uncritical service provider.

At the same time that these CSOs were trying to push the government agenda forward, they were faced with a uniquely challenging political context. My discussions revealed that the relationship between the Harper Conservatives and CSOs was extremely strained. This affected the ability of insider activists within DFATD and CSOs to maintain the link that the literature sees as crucial to pushing the feminist agenda into development organizations. Further, as the

Harper Conservative government pursued 'equality between men and women' rather than 'gender equality', these vital insider activists became increasingly scarce. As such, the opportunities for transformative gender equality changes decreased, and the Harper Conservatives increasingly marginalized gender equality and the CSOs fighting for it. In response to these difficulties, CSOs demonstrated innovation and resilience as they banded together and shifted their sights to creating public awareness. As much as possible, they resisted the role that the Conservative government pushed on them between 2006 and 2015. Furthermore, the CSOs interviewed in this study maintained their function as critical players in the promotion of transformative gender equality through ongoing advocacy, networking and coalition building. However, as my interview responses showed, some of these progressive actors, understandably, exited the political sphere to "circumvent the government" (Jordan, interview). This loss of progressive voices from politics and the public sector is cause for concern as it is these voices that push transformative agendas within policy forward.

As the space in Canada decreased for CSOs to express their views, either because of perception or due to direct political action, it was crucial to solicit these suppressed voices. By listening to and analyzing the perspectives of civil society actors, we can better understand how policy is being shaped. By regarding CSOs as direct service providers, with no role to play in challenging the approach of the government, it became clear that the Harper Conservatives viewed themselves as the primary, legitimate actor with the expertise and authority to implement policy. This has resulted in a damaging discursive shift,

and policies and programming that essentialize and instrumentalize women and girls. The roles of and relationships between genders men and women were left unanalyzed and unchallenged. Under the Harper Conservatives, achieving gender equality became increasingly difficult and notable setbacks were observed.

The change in government in October 2015 offers a new way to reflect on the Harper Conservative era as a particular moment in Canadian history. The challenges of promoting gender equality under the Harper Conservatives must also be understood in the broader context of a particular policy and programmatic approach that distinctly belonged to the three consecutive Harper Conservative governments between 2006 and 2015. The literature review and interviews conducted for this study highlighted several important trends in CSO-government relations during this time period. The broader challenge of increased marginalization of CSO participation was notable during this time period and had a significant impact on how gender equality policies and programming played out in practice.

This MRP was written and concluded at the end of this Harper Conservative era and at the dawn of a new Liberal government under the leadership of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau. Many questions remain at this time of transition, including the manner in which gender equality and partnerships with CSOs will be treated. The value of the research for this MRP remains squarely in relation to understanding the impacts (as experienced by CSOs) of changes to gender equality discourse, policy and practice under the Harper Conservatives.

Interviews with 12 staff members from 11 CSOs in Canada offers a valuable overview of a wide scope of organizations that shared a similar message: the Harper Conservative government did not actively engage with CSOs in the promotion of programs designed to promote 'equality between women and men' or gender equality. Furthermore, the CSO community faced numerous and new challenges to receiving funding that forced some CSOs to act as service delivery agencies promoting government priorities rather than as advocates for gender equality with demonstrated experience and knowledge of the way that gender equality programming should be delivered. To cope with changing rules, procedures and policies, many CSOs began working more collaboratively in networks and partnerships. Such coalitions may continue to serve these CSOs well as they forge ahead with their commitments to gender equality and transformative gender mainstreaming.

Annex A – Interview Guide

Preamble:

My name is Sara Walde and I am a current Master's student at the University of Ottawa. I am studying International Development and Globalization with a specialization in Feminist and Gender Studies.

I am working with Dr. Rebecca Tiessen to research Canada's foreign aid policies in the approach to gender equality in development. Interviews with key DFATD officials have occurred, and we now wish to supplement this knowledge with invaluable perspectives from the NGO sector. I will be using some of this data for writing my own thesis. As you are an expert in this field, I am delighted to speak to you.

This interview is divided into three parts. First, I am hoping to get to know your organization as well as your own personal motivations. Second, I wish to understand the current context in which you and your organization are operating. Finally, I would like to explore the strategies you use to interact with government officials that push your values forward.

Before the interview officially begins, we need to go through the ethics form, which I sent to you in advance.

You and Your Organization

1. What is your name and your organization's name?
2. When did you join your organization?
3. What did you do before joining this organization?
4. Did you have a background in gender equality and development? If so, tell me about it. If not, how did gender equality become a part of your work in development projects?
5. What is your organization's overall objective?
6. What does gender equality mean to your organization?
7. How do you, personally, understand gender equality?
8. How do these understandings inform your work?
9. What have been some of your own personal achievements in promoting gender equality as a priority in development projects?
10. Have you been involved in some of the networks within Canada to promote gender equality such as the WPSN? As an individual? As an organization? Do you see value in networks such as these?

Context

1. How do you see the Federal government's vision of gender equality, particularly with the work the DFATD has been doing? For example, do you see gender equality as a priority? Is it mainstreamed well?
2. Does this vision align with your organization's understanding of gender equality?
3. In the past five years (since 2009), what have been some of the biggest obstacles you have faced in the promotion of gender equality? (refer to funding, policy commitments, government priorities, coding, monitoring and evaluation, other)
4. Prior to 2009, what did you see as some of the obstacles to ensuring Canada's commitments to promoting gender equality?
5. Do you receive funding from the Government of Canada? Have you faced challenges in receiving funds? If so, expand. Did you ever receive funding from the Government of Canada
6. How can gender equality become a bigger priority in NGO work? In government work?
7. What are some of the opportunities you see for the way forward for Canada's commitments to gender equality? What is the Federal government doing well, if anything?
8. What are some concerns you have for future program commitments to gender equality? Are we doing enough to promote gender equality in maternal, newborn and child health initiatives and other activities?

Strategies

1. Do you or your organization try to influence government activities on gender equality?
 - a. If so, how? (research, networking with other NGOs, networking with government departments, public awareness campaigns, interacting with political parties?)
 - b. What strategies do you believe have been the most impactful? In what ways were they impactful? What was achieved?
 - c. If not, why? Did you ever attempt to influence government activities? Do you work with or support other NGOs or networks to influence government activities?

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